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Author: Reina Melcher Marquis

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TORCH BEARER ***

THE TORCH BEARER

BY

REINA MELCHER MARQUIS

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**TO
MY HUSBAND**

**FOR WITHOUT HIS HEARTENING FAITH IN MY
WORK, HIS GENEROUS SYMPATHY WITH IT,
AND HIS DISCERNING CRITICISM OF IT, THIS
BOOK WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN WRITTEN.**

THE TORCH BEARER

CHAPTER I

Peter Burnett stood on the top-most of the broad white steps leading to the "Shadyville Seminary for Young Ladies." He had just closed the door of that sacred institution behind him, and with a sigh of relief which was incompatible with the honors of his professorship. But Peter had never duly valued his position of instructor to Shadyville's feminine youth, though his reverence for scholarship was deep and sincere.

It was Friday afternoon, and freed from the chrysalis of his bread-winning duties, he was about to spread his wings for the flight of his inclination. He looked out on the April greenery of the town with the fastidious gaze of one who has the world to choose from; for though he was a poor young school-master, clad in a shirt that had been darned too often, he was also a Burnett of Kentucky and born to a manner of leisure and arrogance.

Slowly, and with this manner at its best, he began to descend the steps. His whole lax figure assumed an air of indolence that, for all his lack of imposing proportions, subtly invested him with distinction, and he set a dallying, aristocratic foot upon the quiet street. In that descent he triumphed over the mended shirt—and forgot it.

From Friday afternoon until Monday morning—the brief interval when little girls are reprieved from lessons—he had indeed the world to choose from; or, to be accurate, the social world of Shadyville, of Kentucky, and of the larger south. Within that radius he might take his amusements where he would and it was a matter of some amazement to those less privileged than he that he made such unspectacular use of his opportunities. Why, thought they, should Peter Burnett waste his holidays over a country walk or a copy of Theocritus when he might be fashionably golfing, dancing a cotillion or flirting at a house party? Not that Peter neglected these pursuits—being a more astute young man than his reserved face and tranquil gray eye would indicate—but that he paused occasionally in the round of them for what his admirers considered less worthy diversions.

And he was pausing now, as he loitered along the wide, silent street with its trees in pale, sweet leafage and its old-fashioned houses showing a prim gayety in the bloom of their garden closes.

He loved this street which stretched the length of the town; beginning in homes of a humble sort; breaking, a little farther on, into a feverish importance as it ran along before the doors of the shops; gathering dignity unto itself as it gained the site of the Shadyville Seminary; and finally advancing, in the evolution of a social consciousness, through the select upper end of town, where it spread itself ingratiatingly beneath the feet of the "prominent citizens" and clung smugly to well-trimmed hedges instead of skirting shop doors, and dingy fences. Peter called its course its "rise in life"—so obvious was its snobbery, its persistent climbing; but his ridicule was the tolerant ridicule of affection. He knew the street like the nature of an old friend; he saw it like the face of one; and if he laughed now and then at its weaknesses, he was none the less certain to enjoy its company.

To walk along *with* a street—not merely upon it—was one of his favorite pastimes, and this afternoon he pursued it in great contentment, with no thought of what its end should be, nor any definite desire. For it was his theory that to walk with a street, divining its moods and discovering its little dramas, was in itself an adventure, and need not lead to one.

But though he was content to stroll with the street, particularly in this pleasant neighborhood of its upper end, he soon halted, perforce, at the greeting: "Peter, you *won't* pass me by?"

It was a blithe voice that addressed him, pretty and clear, but it was not the voice of youth; and Peter, glancing toward the veranda whence it came, saw sitting there an old lady who was like the voice, pretty and blithe and brave, though with no affectation of a youth long gone. His face lighted at sight of her, and he hastened up her garden path.

"Dear Mrs. Caldwell!" he cried, both hands extended. And then, with pleased alacrity, he settled himself upon the step at her feet.

"It's worth while taking a walk up this way," he remarked appreciatively.

"Now confess," laughed the old lady, "confess that *I* am not the adventure you are seeking this afternoon!"

"I wasn't seeking one at all," disclaimed Peter, "but I couldn't refuse a divine accident." And as she shook a chiding head at his flattery, he went on firmly: "It's the wayside adventures like

this which have long since decided me to start out with none in view. The gods presiding over a wayfarer's destiny always offer him something better than he could have provided for himself!"

"Oh, Peter! Peter!" protested the old lady, "what a book of pretty speeches you are!" But the two smiled at each other with the happy understanding of friends to whom disparity of years was no barrier.

"And how does your garden grow, Mistress Mary?" Peter presently inquired.

Mrs. Caldwell looked out upon her trim flower beds where bloomed tulip and crocus in April festival. "My silver bells and cockle shells grow very well," she answered, in the spirit of the rhyme, "but"—and her delicate old face quivered into an anxious quickening of life—"but, Oh, Peter! I fear my pretty maid grows too fast for her own good."

"Sheila? Then you've seen?" And Peter sat up eagerly, shedding the garment of his indolence.

"Then you've seen!" returned Mrs. Caldwell. "But what have you seen, Peter? What do you think of her?"

"I think," said he slowly, "that she has the most delightful mind I've ever encountered."

Pride leapt into Mrs. Caldwell's eyes, but, as if to make quite certain of him, she demurred: "She's only a little girl, Peter—only a little twelve-year-old girl."

"Yes," he assented. "That's why I'm so sure of her quality. At her age—to be what she is! Why, Mrs. Caldwell, her mind is like light! And it isn't just a wonderfully acute intelligence either. She has the feeling, the intuition, too. It's as if she thinks with her heart sometimes!" And his face glowed as it never did save for something precious and rare.

"Have you considered her future?" he added.

Mrs. Caldwell smiled: "What do you suppose I'm living for?"

"To make her like you, I hope," answered Peter gallantly. His grandfather had loved Mrs. Caldwell, and his appreciation of her was inherited.

"To make her so much wiser!"

"Wiser?" And Peter looked fondly up at the lovely old face above him. For it was lovely, lovely with living, with the very years that might have withered and spoiled it. To him the wisdom of such living was beyond compare.

But she insisted: "Yes, so much wiser. Peter, in my youth it wasn't ladylike to be too wise. I had a few womanly accomplishments. I sewed. I sang. I read Jane Austen and Miss Edgeworth and Charlotte Brontë. And I gardened a little—with gloves on and a shade hat to protect my complexion. And sometimes I made a dessert. Peter dear, I was a very nice girl, but—" And she flung up her hands with a gesture that mocked at her futility.

"Sheila can never be nicer!" he persisted loyally.

"Oh, yes, she can—if some one wiser than I teaches her!"

"I," said Peter importantly, "I teach her rhetoric at the Shadyville Seminary. "I," quoth the sparrow, "with my little bow and arrow!""

Mrs. Caldwell leaned forward and touched his shoulder. "I'm very serious," she said. "Here's my little orphaned Sheila—my dead boy's child—with no near kin in the world but me. And I'm not fit for the task of helping her to grow up. Oh, Peter, will *you* help?"

"You know I will! At least, I'll try."

She smiled at him through her earnestness. "Your rhetoric isn't enough," she warned him. "All you know isn't enough. You'll have to keep on learning too, Peter, if you're really going to help her."

"I will," he promised again. "I'm twenty-eight, and a lazy beggar—but I can still learn."

Mrs. Caldwell drew a quick breath of relief: "Thank you, Peter. To tell you the truth, I've been really a little frightened lately."

"About Sheila? But she's so sweet!"

"And so strange! She isn't like a child. And it's not because she's outgrowing her childhood, for she's not like a young girl either. Peter"—and Mrs. Caldwell's voice sank to a whisper now, as if she communicated a dangerous thing—"Peter, she's like—*a poet!*"

Peter laughed outright at her timid pronouncement of the word. "But is that so terrible?" he teased. "All poets are not mad, after all."

"Oh, you may laugh. I dare say my terror of a thing like genius is funny. But it's genuine terror, Peter. What should I do with a poet on my hands? I tell you, I'm not wise enough to—to trim the wick of a star!"

"Well," he suggested comfortably, "she may not be a poet. What makes you think she's likely to be?"

"You know how she reads—quite beyond the ordinary little girl's appreciation?"

"Yes—but she may have an extraordinary mind without being a genius of any sort. And I'm responsible for her reading. It isn't so precocious after all. I've just given her simple, beautiful things instead of simple, silly ones."

"But, Peter, I've another reason besides her reading. She goes off by herself and sits brooding—dreaming—for hours at a time. I've come on her unexpectedly once or twice and she didn't even realize that I was there—she was so rapt. She looked as if she were seeing visions!"

"Perhaps she was," said Peter softly. "I've seen visions in my time, and I'm no poet. Haven't you—when you were as young as Sheila? Confess now—haven't you?"

But Mrs. Caldwell resolutely shook her head: "Not like Sheila does. And neither have you, Peter. Sheila is different from you and me. You know her mother was Irish—full of whimsical fancy and quaint superstitions."

"Ah, I had forgotten about her mother."

"Of course. You were only a boy when she died." And her eyes filled with slow, remembering tears as she went on, "She always believed in fairies—even when she was face to face with a reality like death. And Sheila believes in them, too, though her mother didn't live long enough to tell her about them. She never says anything about it, but I know that she has a whole world which I can't share—the dream-world her mother bequeathed to her."

"But that's beautiful!" cried Peter.

"Yes," she admitted, "it's beautiful. But, Peter, it's sad for me because—because I can't follow her there."

She fell silent for a moment, her eyes wistful and anxious; and suddenly he saw the pathos of age in her face as well as its finely tempered beauty, the pathos of all the closed doors that would open no more—among them the door of fairyland.

"It's true," she said bravely, as if they had looked at those closed doors together and she were answering his thought. "I'm an old woman and I've lost the way to fairyland. So I want you to go with Sheila in my place. I want you to guard her dream—and keep *her* safe, too. I'm afraid for her, Peter—I'm afraid!"

"Dear Mrs. Caldwell, how can I walk where your foot is too heavy?" And Peter's voice was very gentle.

"Ask your poets that. I was never one for the poets. I can sew a fine seam and make my garden grow—nothing more. But you have the store of poetry—and you have youth."

"There," said Peter, pointing to a lad of fourteen or thereabout who was coming toward them, "there is what Sheila calls youth."

"And there," retorted Mrs. Caldwell, "is what *I* call the heavy foot. But Theodore Kent is a good boy. He's just not good enough for Sheila. I can't understand the child's liking him!"

Theodore came up to them briskly, his cap off, his yellow-brown hair shining in the sunlight with a vigorous glory, his face ruddy and smiling. His body and his features were alike, strong and somewhat bluntly fashioned, the body and the features of the very sturdy, closely akin to the earth's health and kindness.

"Where's Sheila, Mrs. Caldwell?" he asked, happily unconscious of a critical atmosphere.

"In the back garden. What do you want, Ted?"

He lifted a battered volume. "She promised to help me with this rhetoric stuff," he announced, quite unabashed at the admission of Sheila's superior cleverness.

"Well, run along and find her." And Mrs. Caldwell glanced at Peter as if to add, "Didn't I tell you he wasn't good enough for Sheila?"

"But what, after all, does an understanding of rhetoric amount to? What has it done for *me*?" murmured Peter, answering the glance. And then, as the boy still lingered before them, "I'll go with you, Ted. I must make my bow to Sheila before I leave."

The back garden belied its humble name. The kitchen windows opened upon it, it is true, but

they did not discourage its prideful aspect. Indeed, it might just as well have been a front garden, for it had never been the shelter of the useful cabbage and its homely relations. The young grass was close-cropped with the same care that had been bestowed upon the front lawn, and simple, gay flowers flourished in bright beds and along the smooth walk. Toward the end of the garden, and as if for a charming climax, several cherry trees shook blossoming branches to the spring wind.

And beneath those trees lay Sheila, her eyes lifted to their bloom, a still, enraptured little figure, quite unconscious that intruders were drawing near.

At sight of her, Peter halted and laid a staying hand on Ted's arm. "Don't speak to her!" he whispered.

And so the two stood and looked at her, and yet she did not stir nor grow aware of their presence.

She was a slender little shape, lying there on the fresh grass—a thin child, with a pale face and black hair braided away from it; a child who was not actually pretty, nor, to the eyes of the casual observer, in any other way remarkable. But to Peter she seemed touched, for the moment, with the glamour of enchantment, this small dreamer communing with her fays.

"Don't speak to her!" he said again, as Ted moved restively. "She's as far away as if she were in a different world," he added softly, and only to himself.

But Ted, overhearing, nodded comprehendingly. "Sheila does make you feel like that sometimes, even if she *is* standing right by you all the time. She's queer—Sheila is. But," and he spoke boastfully, though still in the cautious undertone Peter had used, "but I always call her back!"

Peter looked down at him, at the frank, wholesome, unimaginative face, fatuous now with the vanity of power.

"I always call her back!" the boy repeated proudly.

"Yes," said Peter slowly, "you—and people like you—will always call her back. But not this time, Ted—not this time. I'll help you with your rhetoric myself. Sheila has better things to think of just now." And putting his hands on the boy's shoulders, he turned him about for retreat.

It occurred to Peter then that he was fulfilling Mrs. Caldwell's trust, but he shook his head dubiously, nevertheless. He had saved one dream, but—the future was long and the people like Ted were many and intrepid. Suddenly he saw what life might do to a being like Sheila and something of the fear and tenderness that Mrs. Caldwell had felt smote upon his heart.

CHAPTER II

It was on a Saturday of late October that it happened—the adventure which, in after years, Sheila was to see as so significant.

Sheila and Ted had gone to the woods with a nutting-party—a party too merry to do much but frolic, and eat as they gathered. By afternoon their baskets were not nearly full, and Ted surveyed his own with chagrin. He liked to accomplish what he set out to do, not because he was particularly industrious, but because a sense of power within him, partly sheer physical vigor and partly a naturally dominant will, demanded deeds for its satisfaction. If he could stay an hour longer, if he could go a little deeper into the woods, he could fill his basket, he reflected; whereas now—and he looked with contempt and a genuine distress at his meagre store of hazel nuts.

In his discontent he had already lagged behind his companions. The other children had set their faces homeward; Sheila walked just ahead of him, her arm around the waist of Charlotte Davis, a girl of her own age whom she had taken, with solemn vows, for her dearest friend. He might call the two girls, he thought, and together they could soon have a fine harvest, but his inclination rejected Charlotte almost as quickly as the idea occurred to him. For Charlotte, with her pert little freckled nose and her shrewd blue eyes, was not a comrade to Ted's taste. She had never shown him a proper reverence, and he was at the stage when a boy desires feminine tribute even while he affects to scorn it.

Charlotte had never understood him. Or was it what he did not suspect—that she had always understood him too well? At any rate she had a disconcerting way of gazing at him, her head cocked impudently on one side, her eyes half speculative, half amused. And her sharp, teasing tongue was even more disconcerting than her naughty, quizzical stare. He could imagine, from past experience at her hands, what would happen now if he included her in his plan.

"What do you want of more nuts?" she would ask, with the inquiring innocence that he had learned to distrust. "Haven't you got all you can eat?"

"Yes, but—" he would begin to explain.

And she would interrupt him in the middle of his sentence with:

"Oh, I see! You just want to do more than anybody else, don't you? Theodore Kent always does more than anybody else! Don't he, Sheila?" And this with a great show of admiration. Yet even to Sheila, whose loyal mind conceived with difficulty of any disrespect to him, the mockery of the apparent admiration would be obvious.

Yes, that was what would happen if he invited Charlotte to stay, and he felt himself flush at the fancied conversation. But he would ask Sheila. She really admired him! She appreciated him! If she was sometimes queer, she was a nice little thing in spite of that.

"Sheila!" he called.

She paused and looked back at him.

"Come here a minute," he urged. "I want to tell you something." And when she would have drawn Charlotte with her, he added: "It's a secret."

At which transparent hint, Charlotte flung off Sheila's arm and marched on, singing maliciously:

"Ted has got a secret—secret—secret!
Like a little gir-rul—gir-rul—gir-rul!"

And hearing himself thus effeminized, Ted winced and wondered if he had not better have asked her after all.

Sheila came up to him with a troubled face. The feud between him and Charlotte always hurt and bewildered her. "You've made Charlotte feel bad," she chided reproachfully.

But with Charlotte's taunt still ringing in his ears, Ted was ruthless: "Fiddlesticks! If she feels bad about that, she's silly. And I can't tell secrets to silly girls."

Sheila was sorry for Charlotte, but she began to feel vaguely flattered on her own account: "What's the secret?"

"I know a place—just a little way back yonder—that's *fat* with nuts!"

Sheila looked disappointed. It seemed, at this hour, rather a poor secret. But Ted, still with the air of honoring her above all others of her sex, went on: "I'm going back and get some. And"—this impressively—"I'm going to let you come with me!"

Sheila brightened at the magnanimous offer, but a moment later grew uneasy: "Grandmother would be scared if I didn't come home with the others."

"How'd she find it out? Your house is farthest. She won't see the rest of 'em."

"But—but when I tell her—" said Sheila uneasily.

"You *needn't* tell her! Don't you understand? She'll never know you *didn't* come home with the others!"

Ted had a scrupulous personal honor, a pride, as it were, in his integrity. He told the truth about his own transgressions and paid the piper without complaint. But for others his truth was sometimes equivocal, his morality comfortably lax. And these lapses from grace on his part always filled Sheila with a shocked dismay.

"Oh," she protested, "I couldn't do that! Why, it would be *lying*!"

"Fiddlesticks! Where's the lie? You wouldn't *tell* one!"

"It *would* be a lie," persisted Sheila. "It would be a lie if I let her think what wasn't so."

"Fiddlesticks!" he pronounced again. But he looked at her approvingly, nevertheless. Sheila was always "square," and he liked her the better for it. "Well, you go along with Charlotte, then," he added regretfully.

But he had tempted her more successfully than he knew, and her mind was busily working toward some compromise with her conscience. She cast an eye in the direction Charlotte had taken, and that glance decided her. "Charlotte's out of sight," she said. "I—I believe I'll stay, Ted—but I'll tell when I get home!"

It was late afternoon when they did at last start homeward—with baskets as full as Ted had predicted. Going through the bright-hued woods, where the scarlet and burnished yellow of long-lived leaves still flaunted ribbons of flame and the dead and dun-colored broke crisply beneath their feet, they fell amicably silent, trudging briskly along with the impetus of health and hunger. Ted's silence was the content of a body drenched all day in sunshine and clean, cold air, and now deliciously placid; but Sheila's quiet was of a different quality. For her the woods were full of mysteries and miracles; she was sure that little people, as quick and elusive as shadows, darted hither and thither at her very feet, and that enchantment was spread there like a fine-spun web. As she walked onward, brooding over things unseen and yet so surely true for her, there recurred to her a dream of the night before, and so vivid was her remembrance of it that she seemed to be dreaming a second time.

In the dream, oddly enough, she had been walking through these same woods. Here and there she had seen a bright leaf blowing; she had heard her own footsteps on the brittle leaves beneath; a slender shaft of sunlight—the last of the day—had stolen downward and touched her like a long finger. Then, suddenly, the golden finger had withdrawn and the dusk had fallen, not gradually, but in swift, downward billows of mist that flooded upon her and blinded her. She had closed her eyes against them for a moment, and when she opened them again, the mist had disappeared, leaving her in a space of clear gray light. Through this light some one had come toward her, a shape at first vague and ethereal, as if it were a lingering spirit of the mist, but gathering substance and definite outline as it advanced until it became the figure of a woman with arms that reached toward her for embrace. Involuntarily Sheila's own arms had reached forth in answer; she had taken a stumbling step forward; through the pale light there had glimmered on her, for an instant of revelation, the shadow's face.

And she had wakened with the cry: "Mother!"

A strange dream, especially for a little girl whose mother had died soon after her birth. But that dead mother had always been a dear familiar of Sheila's thoughts; her picture had been like a living companion. And though the sleeping vision of her had driven the child, startled to the very soul, to her grandmother's bed, now, as she trod the woods that had been the scene of the dream-miracle, she remembered it without fear.

"What if, after all, dreams sometimes came true?" The thought quickened her breath, but not her feet. In the night she had fled from a dream too poignant, but now she felt no impulse for flight. Rather, she delayed her steps, thrilling as she recognized about her the dream's landmarks.

For now there arose before Sheila's dazed eyes that rare and marvellous phenomenon of a dream reproduced, at least in its physical aspects, by reality. And in such an experience, given perhaps to one in a thousand, it is the reality that seems to tremble—threatened by some older and stronger truth—beneath one's feet. So it trembled now for Sheila as she saw again those features in the face of the woods that had impressed her sleep.

Here were the few rich leaves, fluttering lightly in the evening wind as they had fluttered in her dreaming vision of them! And now her heart fluttered with them, so much stranger than the dream itself was its incredible repetition.

There—just ahead—yes, surely! there was the same long finger of pale sunlight striking downward through the stripped trees! Presently she would pass beneath its touch, feeling it faintly warm upon her cheek—as she had felt it in her dream!

Afterwards would be the dusk. And then—*what if dreams came true?*

She was not afraid, but instinctively she drew nearer the boy beside her. "Ted," she breathed, in an awed whisper.

"Huh?" he asked, roused from his own silent well-being.

But she did not answer, and he strode cheerfully on without troubling himself to question her again. "What if dreams come true?" she was saying within herself, but she could not, after all, put the thought into words for Ted to scoff at.

And then, before she reached it, the finger of sunlight vanished and the dusk was upon her, not swiftly billowing, but slipping softly downward like a silken veil. She was not afraid, she told herself, but the dusk chilled her and she shivered.

After the dusk—if dreams came true!—would be— And then her heart seemed to stop its beating. For dim in the distance, but coming toward her through the trees, there walked a shadow. And even while she watched, it gathered shape and substance unto itself; it ceased to be a floating fragment of mist and became a woman!

But now Sheila's heart began to beat again—riotously. Her hesitations, her unacknowledged fears, were succeeded by a sense of exquisite exultation. The miracle was at hand—and she rushed upon it.

"Ted!" It was not a whisper this time, but a cry, and the boy turned sharply. But Sheila had

already started forward, calling wildly: "*Mother! Mother! Mother!*"

And though the woman was still but a distant figure, she heard that piercing call and answered it with one as clear and passionate:

"*My little girl! I'm coming! I'm coming!*"

For an instant Ted stood motionless, struck to the earth by that simple horror of the unusual, the abnormal, which the very sane and unimaginative always feel. Then, with a single bound, he overtook Sheila and laid a detaining hand on her shoulder: "Sheila, *stop!* It's Crazy Lisbeth! I know her voice!"

He was right. The advancing figure was not the beautiful mother-spirit of Sheila's dream, but a flesh and blood mother who, years before, had lost her husband and only child, and become crazed by her grief. Ever since then her heart had been wandering on a piteous quest for her dead, and her wits with it. And because she was very poor and quite harmless, suffering only the illusion that she would sooner or later find her husband and little daughter, the town was kind to her; set her to work when she would; fed her when she would not work; and left her free for her sad and futile search.

Sheila and Ted knew her well and no fear of her had ever touched them before, but now, as she came onward with her insanity strong upon her, both terror and repugnance seized on Ted.

"She thinks you're her child," he said angrily. "And no wonder! What made you do such a thing?"

Sheila turned to him with her explanation on her lips—the whole confession of her dream and her momentary belief that it had come true—but at sight of him looking at her so protectingly and yet so severely, her impetuous words faltered and grew cold.

"I—I was thinking of my mother," she stammered shyly.

The unexpected reply embarrassed him. He wanted to scold her, but at this mention of her dead mother he could not. So he only dug his foot into the ground and gazed toward Lisbeth, who was now almost upon them, stumbling in her happy haste.

"We can't run away from her," said Sheila.

"She thinks you're her child!" he protested again, but less harshly.

"Yes," admitted Sheila gently, "like I thought she—" And then, at some sudden counsel of her heart, she exclaimed: "You stay here. I'll know what to do!"

It seemed to Ted an unbelievable thing that he saw happen before him then. For Sheila stepped quickly forward to meet the hurrying, pitiful creature who sought her; stepped forward and straight into the woman's arms. As he stared, a shudder of disgust shook Ted from head to foot. "It's horrible!" he muttered to himself. "It's horrible for Sheila to let Crazy Lisbeth hug her!" But he could not go and draw Sheila away. His repulsion would not permit him to approach the spectacle that excited it.

And meanwhile the little girl was murmuring, still in the fold of Lisbeth's arm, words that he could not understand, but that drifted to him with the soft sounds of pleadings and promises.

"Sheila!" he called peremptorily.

She did not reply, but talked on to Lisbeth, interrupted now and then by the latter, but evidently not discouraged in her purpose of persuasion.

"Sheila!" Ted called again, and this time uneasily.

And now she answered, over her shoulder, and with a motion that held him back: "We're going home!"

At that he understood what she was bent upon. She had been coaxing Lisbeth to go home. But why should she concern herself about one who was used to roam the whole countryside at any hour of the day or night, walking unmolested in the desolate safety of her affliction? Why, above all, should Sheila go home *with* her?

For that, apparently, was what Sheila meant to do. She had already started onward with her self-appointed charge, and though the woods had grown more shadowy, Ted could see the two figures plainly, walking close together and linked by the woman's arm. That arm about Sheila's shoulder—Crazy Lisbeth's arm!—set him shuddering again as violently as the first embrace had done. It was an affront to every fiber of his thoroughly normal being. But still he could not go nearer to remove it; by the law of his own nature he had to stay outside the circle of Lisbeth's madness and Sheila's folly. And his sense of responsibility had, perforce, to appease itself with his following them at a discreet range—a distant and sulking protector.

It seemed to him, as he strode on behind them with irate steps, that they would never get out

of the woods. Little woodland sounds, a snapping bough, a breaking leaf, a scurrying squirrel, sounds that he would not ordinarily have noticed, now startled him into fright. The gradual failing of the light oppressed him almost to panic; and when the early twilight settled somberly over the woods, such weird, moving shadows rose up all around him that he would fain have taken to his heels had he not feared what lay before him more.

Crazy Lisbeth scrubbing his mother's kitchen floor was only a harmless "innocent," the pensioner of his condescending pity; but Crazy Lisbeth in the woods at nightfall—Ah, then she became a different and a dreadful creature, one to shake the heart and alarm the nerves of the bravest.

Sheila appeared to think otherwise and to find Lisbeth docile enough, for despite Ted's conviction that the homeward way was interminable, these two went steadily onward and at a fair pace. And after no long interval their attendant knight had the satisfaction of following them from the covert of the woods into the open spaces of the town.

Here Ted's alarms left him, abruptly and completely. He could have laughed aloud at the bogies he had escaped. His self-respect came swaggering back, and with it the determination to assert a belated mastery of Sheila. She was not a block ahead, and now he hailed her.

But as she had done in the woods, she merely called to him over her shoulder: "We're going home!"

Crazy Lisbeth lived on the other side of the town, in a mean little cottage that more fortunate householders had deserted. It was a long walk there and the hour was already late, seven at the least. A vision of Mrs. Caldwell watching for Sheila flashed across Ted's mind and strengthened his resistance against this further perversity.

"You must go with me right away!" he exclaimed, hastening after Sheila. "Your grandmother'll be scared to death!"

"Oh," cried Sheila, stopping now, but with her hand still resolutely gripping Lisbeth's, "Oh, I know it, Ted! But I can't help it!" And though her tone was sharp with distress, she turned obstinately on.

There was nothing for him but to follow her to the end of her adventure. Ted knew it from experience. Sheila in one of her moods, obsessed by some "queer notion," was immovable, though sweetly reasonable at all other times. So with a bad grace he went on in her wake, beset now, not by fear, but by keen resentment of the whole absurd situation.

Thus they came at last, the ill-assorted trio, to Lisbeth's cottage, sitting lonely and unlit by lamp or fire upon a bare hillside. Sheila and Lisbeth paused, and Ted stopped, too, still a few yards from them, but expectant of some further freak and ready to spring forward with a rebuke that would end the mad episode on the spot. But just then the moon swung slowly out from some prisoning cloud, flooding the hillside with light, and as Ted saw Lisbeth's face, he forgot his intention of remonstrance and could but stand and gaze.

For a moment he thought that the woman before him could not be Crazy Lisbeth at all, and then he thought that the moonlight tricked him. But of one thing he was sure; be the cause what it might, he saw a Lisbeth magically and beautifully changed. Foolish and pathetic and middle-aged she had been only yesterday, but to-night love and joy had had their way with her for a little while and had transformed her almost into youth and comeliness again. Unconscious of Ted's watchful and hostile presence, as she had been from the first, she turned to Sheila with a simple and moving tenderness:

"Come," she said, opening her gate.

But Sheila stood motionless, her face soft with a pity that could no longer protect.

"Come," urged Lisbeth, "come, darling precious! This is home!"

But Sheila did not stir. "I—I can't," she answered gently.

"You can't? *You can't?* Oh, it's been a dream!—a dream!—a dream! You're not real—you're never real! I see you—and see you—and see you! *But when I reach you, you're not real—not real!* I believed it was different this time—but it's always the same! *You're not real!*"

And with that despairing cry, the Lisbeth whom Ted knew so well stood there before him again, old and foolish and piteous, whimpering softly and plucking at her ragged dress.

Sheila put her hand on the bent shoulder—bent to its long burden. "I *am* real," said the child in a clear, steadfast voice that somehow, penetrated Lisbeth's sad whimsies, "I *am* real!—and I'll come back!"

"You'll come back?" And Lisbeth ceased her whimpering and laid pleading hold on her. "You'll come back? I don't believe you're real now—I *can't* believe it any more! But I don't mind that if you'll come back anyway. You will? You promise?"

"I promise," answered Sheila. "If you are good—if you go straight into the house—I'll come back."

Lisbeth looked at her for an instant with an odd shrewdness in her poor foolish face. Then she nodded, evidently satisfied with what she saw. "I'll be good," she agreed. "I'll go in. Oh, my pretty darling! My dearest precious! Lisbeth will be good!" And after a quick clasp of Sheila, she went obediently into the mean little house and, without even a backward glance, closed the door behind her.

Sheila stepped toward Ted. "I'll go home now," she said wearily. Then she added, as if she were stretching out a wistful hand to his sympathy: "Oh, Ted, she thought—until the last—that I was her little girl!"

"Yes," he said, all his resentment returning, "and you let her! You *let* her, Sheila! How could you do such a thing?"

"But it comforted her. It comforted her to think so, Ted."

"She wasn't comforted when she thought you weren't real!"

"Yes, she was—even then. She was when I promised to come back."

"You can't keep your promise."

"Why can't I?"

"Your grandmother won't let you. You know that as well as I do. 'Tisn't your place to comfort Crazy Lisbeth, and Mrs. Caldwell will tell you so. Her troubles aren't any of your business."

"They are!" cried Sheila, with an anger now that matched his own, "they are—because I understand how she feels! I haven't any mother—and Lisbeth hasn't any child. Don't you see that it's just the same for both of us? And *her* little girl may be comforting *my* mother up in heaven right now!"

"And she may *not*!" he retorted,

"I believe it!" she proclaimed, carried away by the imaginary scene she had evoked.

"Well," said Ted, with his most exasperating tone of superior intelligence, "*I* don't!"

She glanced up at him as he trudged beside her, his face firm with his substantial beliefs, his feet sturdily treading a very solid earth. And though she was only a little girl, unlearned in the finger-posts of character, Sheila felt what she could not name nor analyze. She remembered that she had almost told him her dream, and she shivered at the thought.

"No," she remarked ruefully, "you don't believe anything that you can't *see*, do you, Ted?"

"I don't believe lies!" he replied crisply, "not even when I tell 'em myself."

"*Lies*?" she repeated in astonishment.

He stopped and faced her. "Look here! You said you couldn't let your grandmother think you came home with the rest of 'em when you didn't because that would be lying."

"Yes," agreed Sheila with conviction.

"But you let Lisbeth think what wasn't so!"

The words flashed their accusation at her with unmistakable clarity. "Yes," she assented once more, slowly, "I did." And then, with pained surprise, "Why, that *was* a lie, wasn't it?"

"And now," finished Ted ruthlessly, "you're making up lies about heaven for yourself! What's the matter with you, Sheila?"

They had reached Mrs. Caldwell's gate, and for a moment they stood staring at each other, the question hanging in the air between them. Then there came to Sheila a swift, inward vision of the contradictions of her own temperament, a vision untempered by the merciful knowledge that, in the final analysis, all human nature is very much alike.

"Oh," she cried, "what *is* the matter with me?"

And with a sob, she fled up the path to the house, leaving Ted frightened, ashamed, and more bewildered than ever.

CHAPTER III

The moment when Sheila had that terrifying inward vision of her own inconsistencies marked the beginning of her self-consciousness. For a while this was acute and painful. She was always afraid of finding herself, quite unintentionally, involved in a labyrinth of untruth, and her conscience, which passionately rejected any dishonesty that it perceived, was continually occupied in analyzing her emotions and impulses, her most guileless thoughts and her simplest actions.

"I am naturally a liar," she told herself solemnly. "I must watch myself all the time—because I am naturally a liar!"

But she said nothing of her self-revelation and ensuing struggles to Mrs. Caldwell. It was a thing to be overcome in shame and silence, and alone, this innate wickedness of hers.

Her shame was indeed so genuine that she met Ted, for the first time after he had shown her failing to her, with deep reluctance. He must have been thinking of her awful tendency ever since they had parted—as she had been. And he could not possibly respect her! But to her amazement, he greeted her with his usual manner of untroubled good fellowship. Clearly, she had not sunk in his estimation. She was astounded, and shocked at him as well as at herself, until it occurred to her that he might have forgotten the matter altogether. This was incredible, but more honorably incredible than that he should remember and not care. And if it were the case, she must not take advantage of his forgetfulness; she must not unfairly keep his esteem.

"Ted," she said, with an effort worthy of a more saintly confessor, "Ted, I reckon I ought to remind you about the way I acted with Lisbeth."

"What about it? Did your grandmother scold you much?"

"Why, no. Don't you understand what I mean?" It was too painful to put her sin into words.

"Has Lisbeth been after you again?" But the question was obviously not one of sympathy, for Ted's voice was sharp now. At the mention of Lisbeth he had recalled his grievance.

"No," repeated Sheila. "I meant I ought to remind you about—*me*."

And as Ted stared at her with no gleam of comprehension in his eyes, she was forced to become explicit: "I mean—the way I let Lisbeth believe what wasn't so."

Ted looked at her speculatively for a moment, wondering if he had better rebuke her again for her folly, so that she should not commit it a second time. She would be capable of doing the whole thing over, under the impression that she was benefiting Lisbeth. She was so queer!

"You were very silly," he said finally.

"I was wicked!" she exclaimed in a fervor of repentance.

Ted continued to regard her with that speculative gaze. "Well, you *are* a queer one!" he ejaculated slowly.

Sheila flushed. She had abased herself in penitence, and he only thought her queer. He *always* thought her queer! She turned on him with a flare of temper that burned up her humility so far as he was concerned:

"How *dare* you call me queer? How *dare* you call me silly? I hate you, Theodore Kent! I never want to see you again as long as I live! You're—*you're an abomination in the eyes of the Lord!*"

And with this scriptural anathema, plagiarized from the Presbyterian minister's latest sermon, she flung away from him in a fit of wrath that did much to restore her normal self-respect.

However, though she felt no further uneasiness in the presence of Ted—whom she forgave the next day with the readiness that is the virtue of a quick temper—she continued her vigil over herself until time softened her impression of her iniquity. And even then, when her self-criticism had relaxed, her consciousness of her individual temperament remained. She had discovered herself, and this self, like her shadow which she had discovered with wild excitement in her babyhood, would be her life companion. After she ceased to fear it, as a possible moral monster, she began to take a profound interest in it and its behavior.

"What will you be doing next?" she would inquire of it quaintly, "what *will* you be doing next, Other-Sheila?"

She did in fact credit this newly realized self of hers with a very distinct and separate personality. All her caprices, her unexpected and unexplainable impulses, her mystic imaginings, she laid at its door, and in her fantastic name for it—"Other-Sheila"—she probably found the true name for something that the psychologists define far more clumsily.

But stung into sensitiveness by Ted's taunt about her queerness, she kept her discovery of

Other-Sheila to herself. Not even to Mrs. Caldwell, who was a friend as well as a grandmother; not even to Peter, who was all the while feeding her eager young mind with food both wholesome and stimulating, and becoming, in his task, a comrade who rivalled Ted in her affections, did she confide the existence of this other self. With self-consciousness came the instinct of reserve—not a lack of frankness, but a kind of modesty of the soul.

She had passed her fifteenth birthday before Other-Sheila roused her to unrest. Until that time, the shadowy self dwelling deep within her, and every now and then flashing forth elusively just long enough to manifest its reality, had been a secret and delightful companion, one with whom she held animated conversations when alone, and from whose acquiescence to all her wishes and opinions she extracted considerable comfort.

"Other-Sheila," she would say to herself, "is the only person who always agrees with me." And then she would add, with a glint of whimsical humor in her gray eyes, "I reckon that's what an Other-Sheila is *for!*"

But after a while Other-Sheila became less acquiescent and more assertive. And for the first time in her life, Sheila felt within her the troubling spirit of discontent. She wanted something, wanted it desperately as the very young always do, but she did not know what that something was. It was a tantalizing experience, and she saw no end to it.

"If I could only find out *what* I want, I might get it," she mused. And then, "Don't you know what it is, Other-Sheila?" But Other-Sheila was provokingly unresponsive, though it was probably her desire that fretted the objective Sheila's mind.

Mrs. Caldwell saw the unrest in the young girl's face and recognized it for what it was—the unrest of growth. It was a look of unborn things stirring beneath the surface, stirring and quivering as flowers must stir and tremble beneath the ground before they break their way through to the sun. But though she watched eagerly from day to day, ready to do her part when the hour for it should come, Mrs. Caldwell was too wise a gardener to hasten bloom.

"Peter," said she one day, when he had paused in an indolent stroll to chat with her over her garden hedge, "Peter, it's a terrible thing to be young!"

"Is it?" he laughed. "Why?"

"So many things have to happen to you!" And out of the security of her placid years Mrs. Caldwell spoke with an earnest pity.

Peter laughed again. "Well, I'm young—at least, I suppose I would be so considered. And *nothing* ever happens to me!"

Mrs. Caldwell surveyed him with mischievous eyes. "No, Peter," she contradicted, "you're not young—yet. You're not even alive yet. You're too lazy to really live! But you'll have to come to it some day. We all have to be born finally."

He chuckled at her comprehension of him. Then a disturbed look fluttered across his face: "Do you actually mean that there's no escape?"

"None! It's better to yield gracefully—and have it over. And if you don't hurry a bit, Sheila will be through her growing pains while yours are still before you!"

"Little Sheila? The master's star pupil?"

"Yes," she insisted, "little Sheila. You'll be taking her to parties in a long frock before you know it. She graduates from the Seminary next year."

But Peter was nearer to meeting Sheila in a long frock than either he or Mrs. Caldwell dreamed. For at that moment Sheila was planning to wear one before she was a week older.

She and Charlotte Davis were in the latter's dainty room, and spread on the bed before them was Charlotte's new party frock. Charlotte's father was the wealthiest man in Shadyville, and both she and her frock did his wealth justice. She was now at home, for the Easter vacation, from a fashionable boarding-school in Baltimore, the Shadyville Seminary not satisfying Mr. Davis's requirements for his youngest and favorite daughter. Her absence from the little town during the greater part of the past two years had enabled her to erase its traces. She had become a typical city-bred girl and she appeared pert, smartly dressed and, for her sixteen years, amazingly mature. She had always been prettier than Sheila, though no one had ever realized it and probably no one ever would. For her prettiness was so informed with sharp intelligence that her face had a challenging and almost aggressive quality. Boys had never admired her, and men were not likely to do so either, so lacking was she in the softer and more appealing charms of her sex. Even at sixteen her bright blue eyes were a trifle hard, not because of what they had seen—for she was, in experience, still the nice little ingénue—but of what they had seen *through*. The veil of credulity never dimmed her clear, bold glance. But for Sheila she was always gentle, so strong in this shrewd, fastidious young creature was her one deep and uncritical affection.

As the two girls examined the frock on the bed—a rose chiffon over silk that fairly shrieked of

expense—Sheila sighed. "Will you wear it Friday night?" she inquired wistfully.

For on Friday night Charlotte was to give a party—a real evening party to which the debutantes and even the older set were coming, as well as the school-girls and boys. It would be Sheila's first grown-up party—and she had only a white muslin and a blue sash to make herself fine with. Thus Mrs. Caldwell had dressed for parties until her marriage, and it had never occurred to her to provide any other costume for Sheila, who was not yet quite sixteen. Besides, in Mrs. Caldwell's opinion—and even in the exquisite Peter's—there was no sweeter sight than a young girl in white muslin and blue ribbons. But to Sheila, in comparison with Charlotte's splendor, the white muslin seemed unspeakably dowdy. And so, when she asked Charlotte about her toilette for the great occasion, it was with a heart of unfestive heaviness.

"Of course I'll wear this. That's what I got it for. Oh, Sheila, aren't the little sleeves cunning? Just half way to the elbow—it's lucky my arms aren't thin!"

But Sheila only sighed again in response to Charlotte's enthusiasm, and now Charlotte heard the sigh and glanced at her with sudden attentiveness. "What will you wear?" she demanded.

"I'll have to wear my white muslin. I haven't anything else."

"Oh, Sheila, that's too bad!"

"I wouldn't mind so *very* much except for—" And Sheila's eyes, wandering sadly toward Charlotte's chiffon, finished the sentence.

But Charlotte's dismay had already vanished. "You won't have to wear your white muslin either," she announced in her positive, capable way. "You can wear one of my frocks, Sheila. You must! Why"—this in a burst of generosity—"why, you can wear this one!"

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that. Not your new frock, Charlotte! But you're a dear to offer it!" And Sheila gave her friend a grateful hug, though Charlotte never encouraged caresses.

"Well, then, perhaps not this one," agreed Charlotte, to whom, used though she was to her pretty clothes, it would have been something of a hardship to surrender the first wearing of them to anyone else, "perhaps not this one—rose is more my color than yours. But another—a blue silk mull that will be lovely with your blue-gray eyes and black hair. I've worn it only two or three times, and never in Shadyville."

"No, I couldn't," said Sheila again. "Grandmother wouldn't let me. I'm sure she wouldn't."

"I don't see why."

"She wouldn't," persisted Sheila regretfully.

"Now look here, Sheila. She wouldn't *know*. You're going to spend the night with me and dress after you get here. And *she's* not coming to the party."

It was the same form of temptation which Ted had offered Sheila in the woods three years before, but now it was tenfold stronger. Then a mere good time was at stake; now the gratification of her young vanity, of her first girlish desire to make herself charming, was to be gained. And as she had hesitated that day in the woods, for the sake of the fun, she hesitated now for the sake of this new, clamoring instinct.

"I'd have to tell her," she temporized.

"Then tell her," assented Charlotte impatiently, "but don't tell her until afterwards."

It was Sheila's own method of that earlier time—a middle path between conscience and desire, and lightly skirting both.

"I might do that," she remarked thoughtfully. "If I told her—even afterwards—it wouldn't be quite so wicked. And I *want* to wear the frock dreadfully!"

"Just tell her as if it's nothing at all," advised Charlotte cleverly, "as if we never even thought of it until after you got here that evening. Then she won't mind it a bit. You'll see she won't!"

"Yes, she will. She won't like my wearing your clothes. She won't think it's *nice*. And when I tell, I'll tell the whole thing—the way it really happened. But"—and Sheila's full-lipped, generous mouth straightened into a thin line of resolution—"I'm going to do it anyway, Charlotte!"

Three days intervened before the party, and they were not happy days for Sheila. Her sense of guilt depressed every moment of the time, especially when she was in Mrs. Caldwell's trusting presence. For Sheila was not equipped by nature to sin comfortably.

But when the eventful night arrived, and she beheld herself at last in Charlotte's blue silk mull, with its short sleeves and little round neck frothy with lace, and its soft skirt falling to her very feet, she forgot every scruple that had been sacrificed to that enchanting end.

Charlotte, gay as a bright-hued bird with her blue eyes and yellow hair and rose-colored gown, and her mother and young Mrs. Bailey, her married sister, all stood around Sheila in an admiring circle, every now and then breaking out anew into delighted exclamations over their transformed Cinderella.

"Isn't she too sweet?"

"And look at her eyes—as blue as Charlotte's, aren't they?"

"And what a young lady she seems! Isn't that long skirt becoming to her?" cried Charlotte.

Charlotte had worn her party frocks long for the last year, and she approved emphatically of the dignity thus attained for a few hours. It gave her a delicious foretaste of the real young ladyhood to come, when she meant to be very dignified and very brilliant indeed.

But to all their pleased outcry, Sheila said nothing at all. She merely stood, radiant and silent, before them until they had to leave her for a last survey of the rooms downstairs, the flowers and the supper. Then, sure that she was quite alone, Cinderella stole to the mirror.

For a long time she gazed at the girl in the glass; a straight, slim girl in a delicate little gown that somehow brought out fully, for the first time, the charming delicacy of her face—not the delicacy of small features, of frail health, nor of a timid temper, but of an exceeding and subtle fineness, partly of the flesh, partly of the spirit, like the fineness of rare and gossamer fabrics. Sheila, of course, did not perceive this, which was always to be her one real claim to beauty, but she saw the frock itself, and white young shoulders rising from it, and above it a pair of shining eyes. And suddenly an ache came sharply into her throat and the shining eyes filled with tears.

"Oh," she whispered, leaning to the figure in the mirror, "Oh, *this* is what I wanted! *I wanted to be beautiful!*"

CHAPTER IV

The evening was half over when Sheila, still up-borne on the tide of her feminine exultation, glanced across the room to find that Peter stood there quietly regarding her. Straightway she forsook the youth who was administering awkward flattery to her new-born vanity, and hastened to the side of her old friend.

"Oh, Peter, don't I look nice?" she demanded eagerly.

But Peter ignored the frank appeal for a compliment. "I think you'd better call me Mr. Burnett," said he. And his tone was so serious that she failed to catch the banter of his eyes.

"Why, I've always called you Peter, just like grandmother does—always!"

"Yes," admitted Peter, "and it's been very jolly and friendly. But, Sheila, I must have *something* to remind me that you're still a little girl and my pupil. There's nothing in your appearance to suggest it, but perhaps—if you will address me with a great deal of respect——"

At that, Sheila laughed and patted her frock: "Oh, I understand you now! Do I really seem so grown-up?"

"So grown-up that I can't understand how Mrs. Caldwell came to let you do it."

"Oh, Peter! *Oh, Peter!*"

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked, surprised at the poignant exclamation. But she turned abruptly away from him, and presently he saw her blue gown flutter through a distant doorway.

"Now I wonder," he pondered, "what in the world I've done. Offended her by appearing to criticize Mrs. Caldwell, I suppose."

But Peter had done a much graver thing than that. Unconsciously, he had summoned Sheila's conscience to its deserted duty; and already, like any well-intentioned conscience that has taken a vacation, it was making up for lost time.

With that comment of Peter's—"I can't understand how Mrs. Caldwell came to let you do it"—Sheila's little house of pleasure suddenly tumbled to the ground. She had not meant to be sorry about the deception of the frock until *after* the party, and until her encounter with Peter she had been successful enough in holding penitence at bay. That vision of herself in the mirror, seeming to answer some longing of her very soul, had indeed kept her forgetful of everything but a sense of fulfillment and triumph. But now, reminded of her grandmother, she began to be sorry at once—impatiently, violently sorry.

"I must go home," she murmured to herself distressfully, as she slipped unobserved through the crowded rooms. "I must go home. I can't wait until morning! I must tell grandmother *now!*"

And so it happened that Mrs. Caldwell, looking out from her sitting-room window into the early spring night, saw a slim figure speed up her garden path as if urged by some importunate need; and the next moment Sheila was kneeling before her, with her face hidden upon her shoulder.

"Why, Sheila!—dear child!"

"Oh, grandmother, will you forgive me?"

"What should I forgive you? I'm sure you've done nothing wrong this time!" And Mrs. Caldwell, who was accustomed to the rigors of Sheila's conscience, smiled above the face on her breast with tender amusement.

But Sheila sprang to her feet and stepped back a pace or two. "Don't you *see?*" she cried tragically.

And then Mrs. Caldwell discovered the transformation of her Cinderella. No demure little maiden this, in the white muslin and blue ribbons of an ingenuous spirit, but a fashionably clad "young lady," who appeared to have grown suddenly tall and rather stately with the clothing of her slim body in the long, soft gown.

"Sheila!" exclaimed Mrs. Caldwell involuntarily. And then, with her hands outstretched to the impressive young culprit, "Tell me all about it, dear."

And sitting on the floor at her grandmother's feet, regardless of Charlotte's crushed flounces, Sheila poured out her impetuous confession, from the first moment of temptation and yielding to the final one of Peter's awakening words.

"And when he spoke of you, grandmother, I just couldn't *bear* it! I wondered how I could have been happy at all—I wondered how I could have forgotten you for a minute! I hated the frock! I hated the party! And I hated myself most of all! I had to come home and ask you to forgive me right away!"

And down went her head into Mrs. Caldwell's lap. "Do you—think—you can forgive me?" came the muffled plea.

For answer Mrs. Caldwell bent and kissed the prostrate head, and it burrowed more comfortably against her knee. But Mrs. Caldwell did not speak. She was waiting for something, and when Sheila continued to burrow, in the contented silence of a penitence achieved, she inquired quietly: "Well, dear?"

Sheila lifted her head at that, and looked straight into the wise, sweet eyes above her: "I wanted something! I wanted something dreadfully! And I didn't know what it was. And then, when I saw myself in Charlotte's frock—and so changed—I thought I'd found what I wanted. I thought—I thought I'd wanted to be beautiful!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Caldwell gently, "I used to think that, too."

"Oh, grandmother, did you? Then you understand how I felt! But—but, you see, it didn't last. I wanted to be good *more*. That's what made me come home. Grandmother, do you suppose *that's* what I've wanted all the time, without knowing it—to be good?"

At the question, Mrs. Caldwell, wise gardener that she was, realized that one of the flowers which she had divined, stirring in the depths of Sheila's being, was pushing its way upward to the light, and that the moment had come for her to help it. She slipped her arms around the girl kneeling before her, as if seeking in love's touch inspiration for love's words.

"I think you will always want to be good," she said, "and I think you will always want to be beautiful. Women do, Sheila dear—even the women who are least beautiful and least—good. It's part of being a woman—just like loving things that are little and helpless.

"But, Sheila, being beautiful isn't enough! Even being good isn't enough, though of course it ought to be. It's essential, but it isn't enough. Every woman must have something else besides to make her happy—something that is hers, *her own!* She must have that to be beautiful *for*, and to be good for—she must have that to live for!

"And that is what you want, dear—the thing that is your own. You have been born for that—you cannot be complete or content without it."

Mrs. Caldwell's voice rose, grave and rich with the harmonies of life, through the peaceful room, and Sheila quivered responsively in the circle of her arms. To the young girl, womanhood, that only yesterday had been so far away, now seemed to be drawing thrillingly near with all its attendant mysteries. And in her next question she took a step to meet it:

"Grandmother, what is it?—the thing that will be mine?"

"Dear, how can I tell? It isn't the same for us all. For one woman it is love; for another it is work; for some it is, blessedly, both work and love. For me—now—it is *you*! How can I tell what it will be for my little girl?"

"I want it!" whispered Sheila. "I want it!"

"You must wait for it, dear. You must wait for it to come to you. You can't hurry life."

"But can't I do *anything*?"

"You can be good, and you can be beautiful, so that you'll be ready for it when it comes. But"—and now Mrs. Caldwell smiled, and with her smile the stress of the moment passed—"but not in Charlotte's frock! It wouldn't be fair to make yourself beautiful with borrowed plumage, would it, little bird of paradise? You'd only get a borrowed happiness out of that—one that you hadn't a right to, and couldn't keep."

Sheila rose from her knees, smiling, too. "I'll go right upstairs and take it off," she declared. "I want to play fair from the start—I only *want* what's really mine!"

And so, coming back, under Mrs. Caldwell's tactful guidance, from the deep waters to the pleasant, shallow wavelets that lap the shores of commonplace life, she began to busy herself with the small duties of the night, closing the windows and putting out the lamps. Then, with bed-time candles after the fashion of Mrs. Caldwell's own girlhood, the two started up the stairs, Sheila leading and lighting the way—as youth always will, despite the riper wisdom of age. Once she smiled over her shoulder; and before they had gained the top of the flight, she paused and reached back her hand to help her grandmother up the last few steps. There was something gracious and strong in the gesture—something that had not been in the nature of the Sheila who had bent her head to Mrs. Caldwell's knee an hour before. It was as if the womanhood of which Mrs. Caldwell had spoken had already awakened in her and with it, not only the longing for something of her own, but that kindred tenderness for things little and helpless—or helpless and old.

"Take my hand," she said sweetly, and there was in her voice the lovely gentleness that young mothers use toward their children.

The next day, when Charlotte came to inquire why her guest had flown, without warning and apparently without cause, she found a Sheila who, though garbed once more in her own short frock, seemed in some mysterious way more grown-up than she had in the trailing splendor of the night before.

"What's happened to you?" demanded Charlotte shrewdly, when the two girls were shut into the privacy of Sheila's little white bedroom, a room that resembled the despised white muslin and blue sash which had been discarded for Charlotte's furbelows. "I know *something's* happened to you. You're—different. Did somebody make love to you?"

"Goodness, no!" denied Sheila in a horrified tone, and the alarmed young blood rose in a slow, rich tide over her neck and face and temples.

"Oh, you needn't be so shocked. Somebody will some day!" And Charlotte laughed lightly out of her own precocious experience.

Of the two girls, Sheila was the one to be loved, but Charlotte was the one to be made love to—if the love-making were only the pastime of the hour. Charlotte was clever and daring and cold, and could take care of herself. She knew, even at sixteen, all the rules of the game: when to advance, when to retreat, and, most important of all, when to laugh. But Sheila would never be able to laugh at love or love's counterpart.

"Somebody *will* make love to you some day!" repeated Charlotte teasingly.

"Well, nobody has yet!" Sheila assured her crossly. "And what's more, I hope nobody will! *That* isn't what I want!"

"What do you want?" asked Charlotte curiously, detecting the underlying earnestness of the words. But she received no response, and so, bent upon an interesting topic, she harked back to Sheila's flight from the party: "If nobody made love to you, why did you run away? Did your conscience hurt you, Sheila?"

"Yes," admitted Sheila, "that was what made me come home. But I stayed home because of something else."

"What?"

Sheila groped for the language of Mrs. Caldwell's lesson: "Because I—I didn't want to be pretty in somebody else's clothes. I was happy for a little while, but it didn't last. You see, I'd borrowed that—the happiness—along with the frock. And of course I couldn't keep it. I just want what belongs to me after this, Charlotte. It isn't fair to take anything else—and it isn't any use

either."

Charlotte stared at her with puzzled eyes. "You *are* queer," she remarked reflectively. "You *are* queer, Sheila. Theodore Kent always said so, and he was right. I wonder what he'll think of you when he gets back from college."

But Sheila, who had blushed painfully at the suggestion of a lover who did not exist, heard Ted's name without a flush or a tremor; and in despair of any conversation about dress or beaux, the guest presently took her departure.

A few days later Charlotte went back to her city school for further "finishing," though she had already been sharpened and polished to a bewildering edge and brilliancy. And left to herself, Sheila resumed her unsophisticated, girlish life.

"We aren't going to have any young ladies at our house after all, Peter," Mrs. Caldwell announced triumphantly over her teacup one afternoon.

And Peter, lounging on the leafy veranda and appreciatively sipping Mrs. Caldwell's fragrant amber brew, lifted a languidly interested face: "How are you going to stop time for Sheila? Of course you've done it for yourself, but not even you, fairy godmother, can do that for other people."

"I don't intend to try. I don't want to try. Because—when my little girl goes—it's time that will bring me some one better."

"The young lady, dear Mrs. Caldwell. The young lady—inevitably."

"No, Peter—the woman!" And Mrs. Caldwell's voice rang with pride and confidence. "There's the making of one in Sheila, Peter—of a real woman!"

"What's become of the poet you used to see in her?" he inquired.

"Oh, you've shut that safely into a cage of books. I'm not afraid of it any more."

"It can still sing behind the bars, you know," he warned her.

"No," she said, growing serious again, "it wouldn't—in Sheila's case. At least it wouldn't unless it got into just the right cage, hung in the sunshine and the south wind. That's what I'm afraid of, Peter—that Sheila herself will be snared into the wrong cage!"

But even while Mrs. Caldwell spoke, Sheila was standing at the open door of the right cage, gazing in with illumined eyes.

The spring was at its height, as warm and ripely blooming as early summer, and Sheila had slipped away to her favorite haunt of the back garden. She had taken a book with her, one of Peter's recommendation, and as she lay on the soft, fresh grass, she idly turned the pages, not from any desire to read, but for the pleasure of touching the leaves and knowing that, if she liked, she had only to look within for words that would create a fairyland as easily as the fingers of the spring had done.

But presently, sated with mere earth-sweetness, she lifted herself on her elbow and opened the book widely where her hand had finally rested. It was the choice of chance, that page; but, as happens every now and then, chance and the Shaping Power were at that moment one. For shining on the white leaf, as if written in silver, were the lines that have stirred every potential poet to rapture and self-knowledge:

—magic casements opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Sheila read them with no fore-warning of their moving music. They flashed, winged, into her tranquil world—and shook it to its foundations. For the first time the full sense of beauty rushed upon her, and she caught her breath with the keen, aching ecstasy of it:

—magic casements opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

She read the lines again, and now aloud, softly, with a beauty-broken breath. She had wanted something, and all the while this—*this*—had been waiting for her. Compared to the joy of it, what was the joy of looking into a mirror and finding oneself fair? What was any other beauty beside this beauty of words, of subtle harmony and exquisite imagery?

And then there came to her the thought that some one—some one just human like herself—yes, human and young—had written these lines, had drawn them from the treasure house of himself.

"Oh," she whispered, "how happy he must have been! How happy! To have written this! If I had done it——"

She paused and sat up straight and still, the book falling unheeded from her hand. Slowly her eyes widened, filled first with light and then with tears.

"If I had written this! If I could write *anything!*"

And suddenly, for that moment and for life, she knew!

"*That* is what I want—to *write!*—to *make* something beautiful!"

And then her guardian angel should have pushed her into the cage and fastened its door. For the sun was shining and the south wind was blowing—and it was the right cage!

CHAPTER V

One September afternoon, Peter lingered in his class-room after his duties were done and his pupils had departed. He usually lost no time in shaking the dust of academic toil from his feet—and from his mind—but to-day an unwonted longing for some steadying purpose, some *raison d'être*, made him remain to dally with the tools of his occupation, perhaps in a wistful hope that he might discover a hitherto unsuspected charm in the teaching of rhetoric to reluctant young girls.

"If they only cared," he thought, "if they only cared a little for the English language, it wouldn't be such a deadly grind to teach I them. But *they'll* never 'contend for the shade of a world.' It's just a dull necessity to them—this business of learning how to use their mother tongue—except, of course, to Sheila. And next year she won't be here to help me endure it. Oh, how I wish I could get away—to something better, something bigger!"

But with the wish, there came to him also the certainty of its futility. He wouldn't get away; the next year, and the year following, and the year after that would find him still at his uninspiring post in the Shadyville Seminary, teaching bored pupils the properties of speech, and inwardly cursing himself for doing it.

For Peter knew that he would always be the victim of his own laziness; that every impulse toward a broader life and its achievements would be checked and overcome by what he termed his "vast inertia." In spite of his mental capacity, his social gifts, his assets of birth and excellent appearance, he would go through all his years without attaining either honors or profits—merely because, in his unconquerable languor, he would not exert himself to the extent of reaching out his hand for them.

He taught in the seminary because he must; because, otherwise, his bread would go unbuttered, or rather, there would be no bread to butter. For he was the last of a family whose fortune had been their "blood" and their brains, and not their material possessions. Nothing had been left to him but the prestige of his birth and his inherited intellect, and the connections which they opened to him. And these connections were rosebuds for him to wear in his buttonhole rather than beefsteak to swell his waistcoat. They entitled him to lead a cotillion, but not to direct a bank.

His natural parts, as he fully realized, would at any time have secured a career to him, if he had had the industry to use them assiduously. A little enterprise, a little initiative would long since have despatched him to the opportunities and successes of a city. But, always defeated by the "inertia" which he regarded as a fatal malady of his temperament—and also, perhaps, by a native distaste for the vulgar scramble and unsavory methods of the modern business world—his fine intelligence wasted itself in small tasks and his ambitions dissolved like dream-stuff in the somnolent atmosphere of Shadyville.

The only success available to him under such conditions was an advantageous marriage. This he could more than once have accomplished, for it cost him no effort to practice the abilities of the lover, and he had, indeed, a reputation for gallantry that invested him with a dangerous glamour as a suitor. But here he was thwarted each time by a quality that dominated him as ruthlessly to his undoing as did his laziness—and this quality was fastidiousness. For him only the exquisite was good enough. He wanted a woman with a face like an angel or a flower, and a soul to match it. And this the eligible girl had never had. So, although he had several times reached the verge of a leap into matrimonial prosperity, he had always drawn back before the crucial moment. A laugh—just a note too broad and loud—had once restrained him from the easy capture of half a million. He could not live with a woman who laughed like that, he told himself!

And on the other hand, though marriage appealed to him, he could not accept the exquisite in poverty. A few years before, he had spent a summer in courting a girl whose profile had

enchanted him. In imagination he saw it always against a background of dull gold—the pure, slender throat; the sweet, round chin; the delicate, proud lip and nostril; the dreaming eye. But in fact, there was no background of gold, dull or otherwise; and when Peter reflected on the size of his salary and the shifts to which poverty must needs resort—the shabby clothes, the domestic sordidness, the devastating finger-marks of weariness and anxiety upon even the fairest face—his courage failed him, and he surrendered the profile to one who could give her a Kentucky stock farm, a town house in New York and a box at the opera there.

After that episode, he resigned his hope of romance. Fate was perverse and offered him impossible combinations, and he had not the energy to seek and seize for himself. So love, like the other big prizes of life, eluded him, and at thirty-three he was a confirmed bachelor as well as a professional idler. He still pursued the graceful, aimless flirtations that are the small change of intercourse at dances and dinners—just as he still read Theocritus—but neither his heart nor his mind engaged in any more serious endeavor.

And yet, every now and then, he felt a faint desire for something more, for something that should not be a pastime, nor a mere bread-and-butter chore—something that would demand and exhaust the best of him and give him in return the pride of work worth the doing and doing well.

This afternoon the desire was more than usually persistent, and it had held him at his desk long after school hours were over, fingering his pen and ink bottle, glancing through the weekly essays which had that day been handed in for criticism, and turning the leaves of a history of English literature with which he had vainly striven to awake enthusiasm in the minds of his class.

The school-room was a pleasant place, as school-rooms go. There were potted plants on the window sills and a few good engravings on the walls, and the afternoon sunshine was streaming gaily in. But to Peter the room was the disillusioning scene of unwilling labors—both on the part of his pupils and himself—and its chalky atmosphere was heavy and depressing.

"What's the use of pretending that *this* is a 'life-work'—a 'noble profession'?" he muttered, after his casual examination of a particularly discouraging essay. "They don't *want* to learn. They only want to get through and away. After Sheila graduates, I'll be without a single responsive pupil. For I won't get another like her—not in years, and probably never. Why don't I chuck it all? Why *don't* I go away? There's nothing to *stay* for! But my confounded antipathy to a tussle in the hurly-burly of my fellow-men—"

At that moment a tap sounded upon the door panel.

"Come in," called Peter carelessly, supposing that a pupil had returned for some forgotten possession. And he did not even look around until an amused voice inquired: "So absorbed, Professor Peter?" Then he turned to see Mrs. Caldwell, an old-fashioned picture in silvery gray, smiling at him from the doorway.

"I've come for a serious talk," said she, when he had seated her beside the sunniest window and established himself close by.

"Well," he answered ruefully, "you've come to the right place and the right person. I was just considering—in these scholarly surroundings—how I am wasting my life!"

"Really?" And she beamed on him hopefully. "Because that's the beginning of better things. You *could* amount to so much, Peter!"

But he shook his head: "Not here. And I'm too lazy to leave Shadyville."

"Why not here? I don't want you to leave Shadyville. I can't do without you! But I want you to do something splendid here. Peter, why don't you write a book?"

He laughed: "Dear Mrs. Caldwell, to write a book requires more than the determination or the wish to write one."

"Genius?"

"Not necessarily. But at least a special kind of ability. The divine fire has never burned on my hearth—not even a tiny spark of it!"

"Then you think it's rather a great thing to be able to write?"

"I do indeed!" And the reverence of the book-lover thrilled through his tone.

"I'm glad you feel that way about writers, Peter," she remarked archly, "because—we have one up at our house." And she extended a note-book to him, a thin, paper-backed book such as his class used for compositions.

"You mean—Sheila?" For he had expected this.

"Yes. It's happened!—as I told you it would." And her voice was very grave now.

He opened the book—and discovered that Sheila's efforts were poems. "I'll read them to-

night," he said cautiously.

But Mrs. Caldwell would not let him escape so easily: "No, Peter, please. If you have the time, read them now. There are only a few, and I can't go home without a message from you about them. Sheila's waiting up there—and she's simply tense!"

"Then she knows you've brought them to me?"

"Of course. Do you think I'd have done it without her permission? Peter, don't neglect your manners with your grandchildren."

"I deserve the rebuke, Mrs. Caldwell. But if Sheila wants me to see her poems, why hasn't she brought them to me herself?"

"Too shy! Peter, poets are *very* sensitive. It's an awful thing to have one in your family!"

"Oh, you won't find it so bad."

"Yes, I shall. I always told you it would happen. And I always told you, too, that I couldn't cope with such a—calamity."

"Well, there's still hope that this may be a case of 'sweet sixteen' instead of genius. I'll take a peep and give you a verdict."

"She's a *poet*," insisted Mrs. Caldwell, obstinately convinced of the worst. And she fixed her eyes on Peter's face, as he read, with an eagerness that, save for her lamentations, might have seemed anxiety to have her opinion confirmed.

Presently Peter chuckled.

"What are you laughing at, Peter?"

"Have you read the 'Ode to the Evening Star'?"

"Yes, I've read them all."

"Well, then——"

"Well, then—*what?*"

"You know why I'm laughing."

"You think it's *funny*?" And there was an unmistakable note of indignation in the question.

"Of course I think it's funny! Don't you?"

There was no reply, and Peter looked up from the note-book. "*Don't* you think it's funny?" he repeated. And then he stared at her. Her cheeks were pink with excitement, her eyes were glittering with angry tears. "Why, I thought—" he began.

But she interrupted him: "I certainly don't think it's funny. I think it's a *lovely* poem! I think they're *all* lovely poems! I expected you to appreciate them, but as you don't—" And she put out a peremptory hand for the book. But as Peter continued to stare at her, she perceived his amusement, and her resentment gave way to mirth.

"Oh, Peter, do forgive me for being cross to you, but you see——"

"I see that you're proud of these poems!" he exclaimed, his own eyes twinkling merrily.

"Yes," she admitted, "I am proud of them. I really do think they're the loveliest poems ever written!" And she met his laughing gaze quite shamelessly.

"And you're glad—yes, *glad*—that she's turned out a poet!" he accused.

"Yes," confessed Mrs. Caldwell again, "I'm glad!" And she leaned earnestly toward him: "*Oh, Peter, isn't she wonderful?*"

But Peter regarded her severely. "Ah, the deceit of woman! And I believed you when you claimed to be distressed! I sympathized with you!"

But Mrs. Caldwell was not to be abashed: "I've been a shocking hypocrite, haven't I? But you're so clever, Peter, that I expected you to see through me."

"I trusted you!" he mourned.

"Oh, Peter! Peter! That's the way a man always seeks to excuse his stupidity when a woman gets the best of him! But you can trust my sincerity now. And you can sympathize with me if Sheila's *not* a poet. You seem to doubt her being one!"

"She isn't a poet—yet. She may become one. I can't tell about that. What I am sure of is that she has a remarkable mind—as I told you long ago. She has things to express, and evidently the time has come when she wants to express them. That's the hopeful point."

"Then she is promising—for all your laughter?"

"Indeed she is! These poems are funny—but every now and then there's a flash of light through them. Mrs. Caldwell, I believe in the *light*. I don't know what Sheila will do with it, but it's there—and it's wonderful!"

The tears were in Mrs. Caldwell's eyes again, not the bright tears of anger, but the soft mist that rises from a heart profoundly moved. As Peter spoke, the drops overflowed and rolled slowly down her cheeks, but she was unconscious of them. "You don't know what this means to me!" she said.

"I didn't know you would feel like this about it. You deceived me so thoroughly! But now I wonder why I didn't realize, in spite of all your protestations, that you'd care just this deeply. I should have understood what things of the mind are to you—you were my grandfather's friend!"

"Yes, I was your grandfather's friend. And he was a marvellous man, Peter. It's the proudest thing I can say of myself—that I was his friend." Then, quickly, as if she had closed a treasure box, she turned from the subject of her old friendship—which Peter knew might have been more—to that of Sheila.

"What shall I do with my poet, Peter? I'm as much afraid of her as I said I should be—and as unfit to help her."

"Let me help her! Will you let me train her?"

"Oh, my dear, I hoped you'd ask to do it!"

"Then it's a bargain—not only for the present, but for the future—after she graduates—as long as she needs me?"

Mrs. Caldwell flashed a keen glance at him: "As long as you will, Peter! I'll trust her to you gratefully."

But if there was any deeper significance in her words than her acceptance of the present compact, Peter failed to catch it. As he stood in the seminary doorway a few moments later, watching Mrs. Caldwell's retreating figure up the shady street, there came to him, however, a sense of having something to work for at last.

"What was it Mrs. Caldwell once said?" he murmured to himself. "That she wasn't wise enough to 'trim the wick of a star'? Yes, that was it. Well," he added whimsically, "I don't suppose I'm fit for the job either, but I'm going to undertake it. It'll be worth while staying here—it'll be worth while living—if I can trim the wick of a star and help it to shine!"

CHAPTER VI

There was nothing spectacular or startlingly precocious about Sheila's development during the next few years.

On her seventeenth birthday, her frocks were lowered to her slender ankles; on her eighteenth, she permanently assumed the dignity of full length skirts; on her nineteenth, she lifted her hair from its soft, girlish knot on her neck to a womanly coronet upon the top of her head. But despite her regal coiffure, she remained very much of a child.

Mrs. Caldwell had achieved the apparently impossible; she had eliminated the rôle of the "young lady" from Sheila's *repertoire*. At nineteen the girl was ready, at the touch of fate, to merge the child in the woman; but there was nothing of the conventional young lady about her, though she led the same life as other girls in Shadyville, a life that abounded in parties—in town through the winter and at the country houses in the summer—and little sex vanities and love affairs.

Sheila herself had never had a love affair. She was a charming young person—not quite pretty, but more alluring in her shy, wistful fashion, than handsomer girls—so it followed that susceptible youths sued for her favor. But they sued in vain. She smiled upon them until they said some word of love, and then she was on the wing like a wild bird.

Whatever ardor there was in her she had expended thus far upon her ambition to write. Under Peter's restraining tutelage, she had long since foresworn odes to the evening star for

prose fantasies, and these were in turn being superseded by what promised to become a clean-cut, brilliant gift for narrative. She had a rich imagination, an unusual facility for characterization, a certain quaint, whimsical humor—that she never displayed in her speech; all of which raised her work, crude though it still was, distinctly above the level of the commonplace.

She had recently sold a little sketch, in her later and better manner, to an eastern magazine with a keen eye for young talent, and the event had been to her as truly the pinnacle of romance as a betrothal would have been to another girl. It had shed a veritable glory over life for her, and all her dreams were now of further triumphs, of approving editors and an applauding public. She would be a famous woman, she told herself, with the naïve assurance of youth. That was her destiny!

So it was small wonder, after all, that Shadyville lads had not induced her to regard them seriously. She would marry some time, of course. Everyone married—at least in Shadyville, where the elemental simplicities of existence prevailed for very lack of its complexities. There was really nothing to do in Shadyville except to participate, in one capacity or another, in birth, marriage and death. Sheila therefore considered marriage an inescapable end, but she thought very little about it along the way thither.

And yet, when the hour of sex romance finally struck for Sheila, when, for the first time, she realized love's moving power and beauty, her surrender to it was tenfold quicker and more unquestioning than would have been that of a girl who had dallied with sentiment from the days of her short frocks. Her very years of indifference were her undoing. Owing to them, love came to her with the shock of an instant and supreme revelation; she who had been blind suddenly beheld a whole undreamed of world, as it were, and the vastness of the vision inevitably dazed her to a degree that made clear perception of it impossible.

Perhaps Sheila would have been less ingenuously innocent, and more effectually prepared for this crisis, had Charlotte Davis been at hand during the formative period of her girlhood. But Charlotte had been traveling in Europe for a couple of years, and her letters—clever, witty, worldly-wise—were too infrequent to equip Sheila for the defense of her heart. So she went forward—profoundly unconscious, pitifully unready—to capture.

She was nineteen years old, and the season was summer, and the moon was shining—when it began. And summer is an opulent thing in Kentucky; a blue and golden thing by day; a thing of white witchery by night; and whether in the burnished glamour of the sun, or the pallid glamour of the moon, too sweet, too full-blooded, too poignant with the forces and the purposes of nature to leave the pulse unstirred.

Sheila, restless with this earth-magic, was standing at the garden gate one evening, when a young man came up and paused, smiling, before her. At first glance, and in the uncertain moonlight, she thought him a stranger, but a second look revealed his sturdy identity.

"Why, *Ted!*"

And Ted he was; a Ted grown to a fine, vigorous manliness—the manliness of a thoroughly healthy body and a cheerful, literal mind. It was obvious at once that there was not a subtlety in him; that, in his early maturity, he was of the same substantial quality that he had been as a child.

Sheila had not seen him for a long time—as time is measured at nineteen—for during his first year at college, his family had removed to Lexington, and neither they nor he had ever returned. But it seemed as natural to her to have him there as if they had parted only yesterday, as natural to have him, and as natural to admire him. She had admired him devoutly when she was a little girl, though she had sometimes had disconcerting glimpses of his limitations. And she admired him now. Instantly she felt that splendid, radiant materialism of his as a charm.

She walked up the path to the house at his side, in a flutter of girlish delight—all sex, all softness, the weaker, the submissive creature. So he had dominated her in the past—except in her rare, "queer" moments when the wings of her quick fancy had lifted her on some flight beyond his reach. Her wings did not lift her now, however; they were folded so meekly against her shoulders that they might as well not have been there at all.

They sat down on the veranda together, and a climbing rose shook down a shower of night fragrance upon them, and the moonlight streamed over their faces as if with the intent to glorify each to the other.

Mrs. Caldwell was playing whist at the house next door, so Sheila and Ted were there alone, save for the cook's tuneful presence in the kitchen. Her song floated out to them in her warm, caressing negro voice—"Weep no mo', my lady! Oh, weep no mo' to-day!" And suddenly Sheila felt that she would never weep again—life was such a joyous thing!

Ted sat on a step at her feet, and he leaned his head back against a pillar of the veranda as he talked. She noticed how crisp and strong his fair hair was, and the sense of his vitality weighed upon her like a compelling hand.

He was telling her what had brought him back. The editorship of the *Shadyville Star*, the

town's semi-weekly paper—the editorship and part ownership in fact—was open to him, and, alert as ever, he was seizing the opportunity.

"It's a chance—a good chance—to go into the newspaper game as my own boss, or as part proprietor anyhow," he explained. "Mr. Orcutt is making the *Star* into a daily, and he wants a live man—a young man—to take charge of it. Father's let me have a couple of thousand dollars, and I've borrowed three thousand more, and I'm going in with Mr. Orcutt as a partner. It's a big thing for me if I can pull it through. And I *will* pull it through. I was editor of our college magazine, and I've worked on one or another of the Louisville papers every summer, so I know a little about the game—and I like it tremendously. Oh, I'll succeed all right!"

"Of course you will!" she agreed heartily. At the mere sound of his bright, confident voice she believed in his ability to succeed in anything whatever.

"Yes, of course I will. And it's nice to have *you* say so. The only question about it," he pursued, "is whether it's a big *enough* opportunity for me. But I'll *make* it big enough. I'll make the paper grow—and the paper will make the town grow. See? All Shadyville needs is enterprise—enterprise and advertising."

"Yes," she agreed again. An hour earlier she would have been ready to protect Shadyville's sacred precincts from the vandals of "enterprise" and "advertising" with her own slim fist, but here she was handing over the keys of the town to modern commercialism without a qualm of hesitation. "*You're* just what Shadyville needs, Ted," she added earnestly.

"I thought you'd feel that way about it!" And his voice was exultant. "You always were a good pal, Sheila!"

And at the tribute Sheila had a swift conception of woman's mission as the perfect comrade. Oh, that was a mission to thrill and inspire one, to move one to high and selfless endeavor! And she dedicated herself, in the secrecy of her own mind, to the cause of Ted and the *Shadyville Star*.

Throughout the next few weeks she was, indeed, the perfect comrade. She who had never before been interested in the spectacle of actual, contemporary life, flung herself now, with a fervor which not even her personal ambitions had excited, into the business of life's presentment through the daily press, and in particular through the medium of the *Shadyville Star*. She read newspapers avidly; she suggested subjects for editorials to Ted; she came down to the office of the *Shadyville Daily Star*—under Mrs. Caldwell's reluctant chaperonage—to see the linotype machine which had been installed in honor of Ted's reign. She even read proof on the tumultuous day which preceded the transformed *Star's* first appearance.

Peter watched her in amazement. "But I thought newspapers bored you!" he exclaimed one afternoon when, coming to read his beloved Theocritus with her, he found Sheila immersed in a whirlwind of New York papers, from which she was industriously clipping items for reprint in the *Star*.

"Oh," she cried, in the rapturous voice of the devotee, "I didn't understand how wonderful newspaper work could be! Why, Peter—I've got my finger on the pulse of the world!"

At which Peter put his Theocritus back into the safety of his pocket lest even its tranquil spirit be corrupted by the fever of journalism.

To Ted Sheila's magnificent energy in his behalf, her unflagging comprehension and sympathy, were steps by which he mounted blithely to his goal. How *could* he fail with Sheila to stimulate him, to assist him, to believe in him?

And indeed, the *Star* did reward the efforts of both its new editor and his silent partner. It made a triumphant debut, and it continued daily to fulfill the expectations which that debut had aroused.

Toward the end of the summer, Ted at last drew a breath of complete security. He was on Mrs. Caldwell's veranda at the time, and he and Sheila were alone together. It was just such a night as the first one of his return to Shadyville; the moonlight poured prodigally downward upon them, showing to each the other's face, silver-clear; the scent of the climbing roses stole to them on the light wind; from kitchenward came the soft notes of black Mandy's song as she finished her evening tasks—"Weep no mo', my lady!"

Everything was as it had been on that first night two months before—and yet everything was different. Within those two months Ted had proved himself as a man—a man who could do his chosen work. And Sheila—Ah, what had she not taught him—what had she not taught herself—of the woman's part in a man's work—a man's life? The same? No, everything was different!

Ted was sitting at Sheila's feet, in what had become his accustomed place. He glanced up at her, sweet and serene in the moonlight, and something rose within him as resistlessly as a mighty tide.

"I'm winning!" he said triumphantly, "I'm winning! But I couldn't have done it without you."

Oh, Sheila, you've been the making of me! What a girl you are!—what a woman! *You'd* always back a man up in his undertakings—if you loved him—wouldn't you?"

"Oh—if I loved him!—" And she looked past him with dreamy eyes. She had never looked like that before, though love had been named to her by others and in more persuasive language. To back up a man in his undertakings—because she loved him— Why, that would be *life!*

Ted had never had the superfine discernment of natures more delicately wrought than his, but he had the discernment of sex—as all young and healthy creatures have. He saw her dreaming look, and he knew something of the kindred thought.

"Sheila"—and his voice was less sure and bold—"Sheila, have you ever been in love? Is there—anybody else?"

"No," she answered simply. And she drew her gaze down from the stars to his upturned face. That which was in her eyes made him catch his breath and close his own for an instant; but she was unaware of the shining thing he had seen—the soul, not only of one woman, just awakening, but of all womanhood, at once innocent and passionate, brave and piteous. He had not needed any subtlety to perceive that—so frank and beautiful was its betrayal.

"Sheila"—and he fixed his eyes upon her now—"Sheila, maybe the town does need me—as you said when I first came back. I'll do my best to make it need me. Because—because I want to earn the right to a home. I want to be able to—marry!"

"To—*marry?*" she whispered.

He leaned forward and laid his hands upon her wrists—importunate hands that sent the blood swirling through her veins.

"Oh, Sheila—don't you understand? *I need you!*"

For a moment the world swayed around her. Her heart was beating, not in her bosom, but in her throat—up, up to her dry and quivering lips. To back up a man in his undertakings—because she loved him!—that was what Ted was asking her to do for him—to do for him always. Yes—and that was life!

Then, slowly, the world grew still once more; the night wind blew down the fragrance of climbing roses; again she heard the familiar refrain—"Weep no mo', my lady! Oh, weep no mo' to-day!"—and now it seemed tender with the tenderness of insistent and protective love.

And all the while Ted's hands were on her wrists, silently imploring. This was life! Oh, she would never weep again—never again in her joy!

"Sheila?"

She bent toward him—as irresistibly as the rose above her head was drawn to the wind—and smiled.

"Oh, Sheila!—*when you look at me like that!*"

And then Ted's face was against her breast, his arms around her. She would never weep again—for *this was life!*

CHAPTER VII

Sheila had been married several months before she ceased to expect a miracle.

She had believed that moment of high rapture when, with Ted's face hidden against her breast, she had seemed to grasp life itself in her ardent young hands, to be but the forerunner of greater moments—of raptures and fulfillments compared to which the first awakening would appear no more than a pale shadow of joy.

Marriage, in some way mysterious and beautiful, would surely alter the world for her; nay, more, would transmute her own nature into something stronger, richer, happier, a wedded nature, wedded in its lightest moods, its deepest fastnesses. She would wear Ted's ring upon her very soul, and her soul would thereby be changed and glorified.

Other wives—all wives, indeed, who marry at the dictates of their hearts—expect as much. It is the way of women to dream and hope above the earth's level, and now and then, in a rarely perfect mating or in motherhood, their dreams come true. But oftenest they wait as Sheila waited—unrewarded. And after awhile they return contentedly to the lowland of everyday reality—where many paths are pleasant and their fellow travelers, though not knights errant, are usually

faithful and kind.

This, after a few months, Sheila did, too. By that time she had begun to regard the first moment of acknowledged love as unique, one from which she had no right to ask more than itself. It was enough to have had it. It *had* been life—of that she was still convinced—but life at its high tide. And the very existence of every day—of tranquil affection and homely duty—was none the less life, too, and good after its own fashion.

So, missing the miracle, she set to work to discover a miracle in what she had; to find exquisite meanings in the fire upon her wedded hearth while her wedded soul remained cold and virginal. And she had the better chance to warm herself beside that fire because it never occurred to her that Ted might be in the least responsible for its limitations.

About her choice of a husband—or rather, her acceptance of the husband whom fate had chosen for her—she had no misgivings.

"Oh, Sheila, are you sure?" Mrs. Caldwell had inquired again and again in that heart-searching hour which had preceded her sanction of the engagement. "Are you *sure*?"

And Sheila had been sure, triumphantly sure. Even then, with the girl's rhapsodies ringing in her ears, Mrs. Caldwell had insisted upon an engagement of six months—"To give the child an opportunity to break it," she had confided to Peter. But the delay had proved unnecessary. At the end of the period imposed Sheila had been as sure as ever, and she was sure still. Ted loved her. Ted needed her. Of course he was the right man for her!

If she had thought to receive more than marriage had given her, the fault was hers, she loyally decided. She had always anticipated miracles. She had always seen life as an enchanting fairy tale, with a marvellous climax hidden somewhere in the chapters yet unread. But life wasn't a fairy tale; it was merely a bit of cheerful realism, with a happy, commonplace climax in accord with realistic standards. It hadn't been fair to demand princes and palaces and winged delights of a bit of realism! She knew now that her expectations had been childish and absurd; that she had asked for more than life had to give; that the joys of this world were simple, home-abiding things, without the wings for heavenly flights. Not even love itself was winged, and it was better so—for thus she need not fear lest it fly away as winged things are wont to do. She had prayed for ecstasy—which, at best, is fleeting. Instead she had been granted a safe and quiet happiness. Was not destiny wiser than she?

But though she reconciled herself to the realities of life and of marriage, she could not reconcile herself to her own unchanged spirit. She had looked to find Sheila Kent a new being, serene, complete—and Sheila Kent was neither.

"I'm just myself!" she admitted at last, when neither faith nor desire had availed to transform the fiber of her soul. "I'm just myself still. Ted used to think me a queer little girl—and I'm the same queer self now. Other married girls are satisfied with their husbands and their houses and—their babies—and I believed I would be, too. But I'm not. Marriage hasn't made me over—and it isn't enough for me. I want something wonderful—I want to *do* something wonderful. I want—why, I want to *write*!"

It seemed a solution of her perplexity—the conclusion that she still wanted to write—and she seized upon it with reviving fervor. Her gift, singling her out from other girls, was the explanation of those unconquered spaces in her soul, spaces never destined for the foot of any man, however dear. Genius, she had heard, was always celibate, and her genius, or talent, lived on in her inviolate, a thing yet to be reckoned with, yet to be appeased.

She had not written during her engagement, nor since her marriage. Not that she had deliberately renounced her ambitions, but that her days had been crowded with other things, with things that, for the time, she thought more vital. Peter had remonstrated with her once or twice, but to no avail, and when she went from the flurry of trousseau and wedding to the more serious business of keeping house in the traditional vine-clad cottage—Mrs. Caldwell having persisted in the wisdom of separate establishments—he no longer protested at all. An industrious young housekeeper and a blooming wife was obviously not to be condoled with over thwarted aspirations. So certain unfinished manuscripts lay forgotten in the bottom of Sheila's bridal trunk—forgotten, or at least ignored—until the day when she fixed on them as the reason of her vague discontent. Then she brought them forth with an eagerness that was, perhaps, the best answer to her self-analysis. Of course she had wanted to write; without knowing it, she must have wanted, for months, to write! Oh, life *wasn't* a bit of dull realism! It was a fairy tale after all—a fairy tale of poems and novels, of gracious publishers and an appreciative public!

She had never talked to Ted about her writing. Somehow she had always been absorbed in his work, his ambitions. He had all the initiative and enterprise that Shadyville, prior to his arrival, had lacked, and his labors and successes had consumed not only his own time and thoughts, but Sheila's as well. She admired his energy; she was dazzled by the juggleries of his mediocre cleverness; she was proud to help him. Like a strong, fresh wind he filled her world—and, incidentally, he was a wind that blew away all the delicate cobwebs, the gossamer filaments of her finer gift.

But now, for the first time since Ted's return to Shadyville, Sheila's individuality rose up within her and claimed something for itself. She had wanted to write—and she *would* write. There was no reason why she should not. Women, nowadays, were wives and artists also. Married women had "careers" as often as the unmarried. In short, fame was still hers to conquer!

She set about conquering it at once—that was Sheila's way—and when, in the middle of a busy morning, some one tapped imperiously on her closed door, she went to answer the summons with an inky finger and dream-laden eyes. But she opened the door to a vision that dispelled dreams by its more charming substance—a young woman whose smart, slender figure was clothed in a mode that had not yet reached Shadyville, and whose alert and smiling face seemed as unrelated as her garments to the sleepy little provincial town.

"Charlotte!"

"Yes," said the vision gaily, "yes—*Mrs. Theodore Kent!*"

And then the two girls were in each other's arms, laughing and chattering, and weeping a little, too, after the manner of girls—especially when there has been marriage and giving in marriage since their last meeting.

They had not seen each other for more than three years, for although Charlotte had been in America several times during that period, she had merely joined her family in New York for brief reunions, and had then hastened back to Paris where she was studying singing. They looked at each other curiously after that first embrace, and, when they were seated in Sheila's sunny sitting-room, they fell at once into confidences covering those three separated years. It was Charlotte, of course, who had food for conversation, but Sheila, as the bride, was the heroine of the occasion, even to Charlotte's broader mind. Marriage may not fulfill the ideals of high romance, but it can always cast a halo.

"Well," said Charlotte at last, when she had heard the tale of Ted's perfections and achievements, "well, I'll wait and see what you two make of it before I give up my liberty."

"You wouldn't be giving up your liberty if you married the man you loved," protested Sheila staunchly.

"Oh, I don't know about that! Suppose I married a man who resented my music?"

"But he wouldn't—if he loved you!"

"Oh! Then Ted doesn't mind your writing?"

"Of course not!" Sheila assured her. "Why, I was writing when you came!" And she held up the inky finger.

Charlotte surveyed the finger with evident respect: "That's right! I'm glad you aren't going to be submerged by marriage. I was afraid you might be. And really, Sheila, you have talent. The 'F — Monthly' would never have taken that story of yours if it hadn't been exceptionally good. I know Mr. Bennett, the associate editor, and his standards——"

"You *know* Mr. Bennett?" interrupted Sheila. And her tone was reverent.

"Yes," said Charlotte carelessly. "I know a lot of writing folks in New York. In fact I've brought one of them home with me—Alice North, the novelist. Maybe you've read something of hers?"

"*Something?* Why, I've read everything of hers I could lay my hands on! Oh, Charlotte, I *adore* her!"

"So do I," laughed Charlotte, "not her books, but her. She writes very well, but she's more interesting than her stories. Now, Sheila, I'll tell you what you must do—you must let me have some of your things to show her! She could be such a help to you if she found you worth the trouble. Let me have a story or two now, and come up to-morrow afternoon to tea—and to hear what she thinks of them."

Sheila caught her breath. "Oh, it's too presumptuous," she demurred, shyly. "For *me* to bother *Alice North!*"

Her eyes were shining, nevertheless, as if at sight of a long-promised land, and Charlotte presently departed with a couple of manuscripts for the touchstone of Mrs. North's criticism.

When Ted came home that evening, he found a Sheila tremulous with excitement, her eyes shining still, her cheeks, which were usually pale, flushed to a vivid rose.

"Oh, Ted," she exclaimed at once, "Charlotte is back!"

"Yes," he assented good-naturedly, "I heard about it this morning and gave her a write-up with a picture." For Ted invariably looked upon events in the terms of their newspaper value.

"Did you know that she brought Alice North home with her?"

"Alice North?"

Apparently he had not the slightest idea who Alice North might be.

"Yes—Alice North—the novelist, Ted!"

"Is she anybody special—anything of a celebrity?"

"Is she? Oh, Ted, you must read something besides newspapers! Mrs. North hasn't been made a celebrity by the papers—somehow she's managed to keep clear of cheap notoriety—but there's scarcely a woman writing to-day whose work is better than hers. She is really—*really*—distinguished!"

Instantly he was "on the job," as he would have expressed it, at that revelation: "Well, she won't keep out of the 'Star'! I'll have a story about her to-morrow. Confound it! I wish I'd known to-day! But the Davises never let me know anything. I found out by accident that Charlotte was home. And such a time as I had getting her photograph. I don't believe that family care about their own town's paper!"

Sheila smiled. She had a pretty accurate conception of the place that Shadyville must occupy on Charlotte's horizon—and on Alice North's. But she only remarked soothingly, "I can tell you all about Alice North. I've read nearly everything she's written, and a number of magazine articles about her, too. I'll get you up a good story about her—the sort of story she won't object to either." Then her enthusiasm swept her from the subject of newspaper values to the true value of Mrs. North:

"Oh, Ted, isn't it splendid for a woman to have a talent like that—a talent that's made her famous at thirty!"

But there was no responsive enthusiasm in Ted's face, no leap of light in the eyes that met the fire of hers. "I suppose so," he conceded grudgingly, "yes, I suppose it is. But I don't care for that sort of woman myself—at least for that sort of married woman."

"But why, Ted? Why? Her work doesn't interfere with her loving her husband!"

"It interferes with her making a home for him. And *that's* a woman's work—making a home."

"But, Ted, maybe he doesn't want a home—or maybe they have a housekeeper."

Ted shrugged: "Oh, if it suits him to live in a hotel, or at the mercy of a hired housekeeper, it's all right. But in that case, he's missing the best thing a man ever gets—I mean the kind of home a woman's *love* makes!"

At those words Sheila would have surrendered the argument—so easily was she swayed by a touch upon her heart. But Ted was not through with the subject. His masculine self-respect was aroused against this woman who was succeeding outside the sphere of strictly feminine occupation, and he was determined to show her, in her worst light, to Sheila.

"Has she any children?" he demanded belligerently.

"No—at least, I think not."

"Now you see that I'm right!" he exulted.

But the moment for yielding had passed with Sheila. "I see nothing of the sort," she replied with a flare of temper. "Her having children—or not having them—has no bearing whatever on the matter."

"Oh, yes, it has! You mark my words—she hasn't had any children because she's wanted to spend all her time advancing herself—building up a tawdry little fame for herself! I tell you, Sheila, talent's a bad thing for a woman—a bad thing!"

"But, Ted—I write."

He stared at her in naïve surprise. Then his face softened into indulgent laughter. "Why, kitty, so you do! I'd forgotten that you scribble. But you don't take it seriously. I don't mind your playing at it, so long as you don't get the notion that it's the biggest thing in life." And he laughed again and pinched her cheek—reassuringly.

She didn't laugh in answer, however. She only gazed at him with an odd intentness, as if she were seeing him for the first time. Then, gravely, she inquired: "What would you think the biggest thing in life, Ted—if you were a woman—a woman like Alice North?"

He drew her down to his knee and whispered into her ear. She was very still for an instant, her whole body subdued, spellbound, by that whispered word. Then, with a movement singularly untender, she withdrew from his arms and stood erect—free—before him. The rich scarlet still

flooded her cheek—now like a flag of reluctant womanhood—but he searched her eyes in vain for the glow that should have matched it.

"Well—you'll think so some day!" he insisted gently.

CHAPTER VIII

Sheila was not naturally secretive, and it was a measure of the antagonism which Ted had aroused in her that she said nothing to him of her projected visit to Alice North.

She had intended to tell him at once of Charlotte's kindly plan to interest Mrs. North in her work; she had been impatient to tell him, and her announcement of Charlotte's return, and Mrs. North's arrival with her, had been meant only as the preface to the confidence. She had been so sure of his sympathy, of his ambition for her and his pleasure in this opportunity to test her power.

His real attitude toward the achievements of women she had never suspected. He had so gladly and gratefully accepted her help in his own work, he had so generously acknowledged her ability, that she had never conceived of any sex distinction in his views. She had been his comrade—now he would be hers. And oh, she would make him proud of her! She would see his eyes light for her as, sometimes, she had seen them light over the story of men's successes. For Ted loved success.

If she looked forward to triumphs, he was always at the heart of them. Whatever she could do would be done more for his honor than for her own. Whatever was rare and fine in her she had come to value first because she was his wife—and afterward for her own profit. She imagined herself, crowned by Mrs. North's praise, returning to Ted to cry:

"It is the real, the true thing—my gift! I will do beautiful work. Oh, dearest, I have more to bring you than I dared to believe!"

So her impetuous mind had run onward to meet happy possibilities when Ted arrested it with the comment, "I don't care for that sort of woman myself—at least for that sort of married woman!" And at the words, Sheila's dreams had fallen, like broken-winged birds, to the ground.

For a moment—nay, through all the conversation that followed, a conversation that revealed to her with cruel clarity a phase of her husband's mind that she had not hitherto encountered—she was wondering if those dreams would ever rise again. Rude and stupid blows from the hand she loved best had struck them down. How could they recover themselves? How could they sing and soar—those fragile, shattered things?

But even as she glimpsed them thus, broken, defeated, there surged up within her the strength of resistance. Sweetly compliant in all the common affairs of her and Ted's joint life, she had, for this issue so vital to her, an amazing obstinacy. Defeated? She and her dreams? *No!* Her dreams were her own, born of her as surely as the children of her body would be. They were hers to save—hers to realize. And she was strong enough to do it!

That had been her thought when she withdrew herself from Ted's knee. His whisper—"The greatest thing that can happen to a woman is motherhood!"—had inspired no tenderness in her. For at that moment there was astir within her, violent and dominant, the impulse that is mightier than motherhood itself—the impulse of *creation*. And it was none the less imperative because it demanded to mould with written words rather than living flesh.

Ted's last gentle speech, his hurt expression when she turned coldly from him, moved her not at all. For the time, he was not Ted, her beloved, but Man, her enemy. True, she had not regarded man as an enemy before. Peter, for instance, had been an ally without whom she could not even have fared thus far. But Peter was not a husband; his masculinity had not been appealed to—nor threatened. She saw now that men would always fight for the mastery of their own women, would always seek to impose sex upon them as a yoke.

Ah, that black, bitter gulf of sex!

Sheila, looking into it for the first time, shuddered with revolt and rage. So *this* was life; this the end of such moments as her exquisite awakening to love. To *this* the high and heavenly raptures lured one at last! A bird in the wrong cage, impotently beating its breast against the bars—Sheila was like enough to such an one in that furious, unconsciously helpless hour.

By the next day, however, the fierce whirlwind of her astounded resentment had passed. She began to see that Ted might be the victim of his sex as she was the victim of hers; that the real tyranny was not that of Ted over her, but of Nature over them both; of Nature who would use them each with equal ruthlessness for her own purposes. But this perception did not daunt her.

Unhesitatingly, she arrayed herself against Nature now; she would save her dreams even from that! And as Ted was a part of Nature's plan, she said nothing to him of her determination to fulfill herself in spite of it.

In the afternoon she set out resolutely for Charlotte's. It was summer, and Shadyville was at its fairest. As Sheila trod the wide, tree-canopied streets, with their old-fashioned houses in fragrant garden closes on either side, a hundred tiny voices whispered to her messages of peace; of life that goes on from summer to summer; of growth, in the dark and choking earth, that springs at last upward to the sun. But she did not hear. For her there was neither comfort nor peace nor any joy in the processes and victories of mere life.

When she reached the Davis house, Charlotte and Mrs. North were on the veranda, clad brightly in a summer frivolity, and their air of leisure and gayety was oddly unlike the tense and passionate mood of Sheila herself. In fact the whole scene—the porch with its fluttering awnings and festive flowers, the dainty tea-table that already awaited the guest, the two charming women presiding there—seemed far removed from the grave resolve and stormy emotions that Sheila had brought thither. For an instant, as she paused at the gate, she felt herself absurd. She had come to have afternoon tea with two women who were obviously of the big, conventional world—and she had brought her naked soul to them! Acutely self-conscious, painfully humiliated, she would have retreated if she could, but Charlotte was already hailing her. And then—her hand was clasped in Alice North's, her eyes were meeting eyes at once so probing and so luminous that they opened every door of her nature and flooded it with light.

Sheila had never had a case of hero-worship, but as she put her hand in Mrs. North's, she fell, figuratively, upon her knees. The very buoyancy and assurance of the latter's manner, which had, for an instant, chilled and rebuffed her, now appeared to her the outward manifestation of a brilliant and conquering spirit. Like a devotee, she watched Mrs. North's quick, graceful movements, her vivid, changeful face; like a devotee she listened to her sparkling, inconsequent chatter. This woman, handicapped by her womanhood, had done big things. Any word from her lips, any gesture of her hand was something to admire and remember.

It never even entered Sheila's head that, although she had done great things, Alice North might not be a great woman. It never occurred to her to ask *how* she had triumphed—at whose or at what cost. She never even dreamed that one's life—just a noble submission to Nature, a willing and patient compliance with laws and purposes above one's own—might be the final and fullest expression of genius. Alice North had written books—and Sheila was at her feet.

After awhile Charlotte tactfully left her alone with her idol—in whose footsteps she meant to walk henceforth—to *climb!*

"I've read your stories," said Mrs. North softly then. It was the first mention of Sheila's work, and the girl quivered from head to foot. She gazed mutely at the oracle—waiting for life, for death.

Suddenly Mrs. North leaned forward and caught Sheila's hands in hers. Alice North had never failed to be sensitive to drama; to play her part in it with sympathy and effect.

"My dear," she exclaimed, and her voice was clear and thrilling, "my dear, you have it—the divine gift!"

And as they looked at each other, the eyes of each filled with tears. Alice North was indeed sensitive to drama—so sensitive that her counterfeit emotions sometimes deceived even her—and Sheila was shaken to the heart, to the soul.

"You mean—you mean—that I—" began the girl brokenly.

"I mean," answered Mrs. North, "that you are already doing remarkable work—that you will go far—unless—"

"Unless what?" breathed Sheila.

"Will you let me advise you?"

"Oh, if you only will! What shall I do?" And Sheila bent trusting, obedient eyes upon her.

"Do? Dear child, I can tell you in a word. You must renounce!"

"Renounce?" repeated Sheila vaguely.

"Yes, renounce!" And Alice North turned a face of pale sacrifice upon her—with that inevitable instinct for the dramatic. Few women had renounced less than she—less, at least, of what pleased them—but at that moment, in the intensity of her artistic fervor, she believed herself an ascetic for her work's sake.

"The common lot of womanhood is not for you," she declared. "You must live for your art!" And her voice trembled with the touching earnestness that she had so easily assumed—and would as easily cast off.

To Sheila, however, there never came a doubt of Mrs. North's deep sincerity. She had listened, as if to a priestess, while the novelist proclaimed her sublime creed of renunciation, and she now offered the obstacle to it in her own situation with a sense of having fallen from grace in being thus human:

"But I'm married, you know."

"And so am I. But I am consecrated, nevertheless, to my art. And so, my dear, must you be. You must give yourself utterly,—*utterly*—to your art! Art won't take less. *Your* husband must live for *you*—instead of your living for him after the fashion of most wives. And you'll be worth his living for—I'm sure of that."

"I—I don't understand," faltered Sheila. "I don't understand what it is I mustn't do for Ted."

Alice North held her hands more closely and fixed her luminous eyes upon her—eyes which, to many before Sheila, had seemed to shine with the light of a beautiful soul: "You mustn't do for him the one thing that you and he will want most—you mustn't have children for him! My dear, *you* must be a mother with your *brain*—not with your body. You can't do both—at least, worthily—and you must give yourself to creation with your mind. There are women enough already to become mothers of the other sort!"

Sheila did not reply. Slowly the glow faded from her face, from her eyes. Slowly and listlessly she withdrew her hands from Mrs. North's fervid clasp and leaned back in her chair. Clearly the supreme moment had passed; the flame of her ardor had flickered out. Mrs. North glanced curiously at her. An instant before, the girl had been radiant, tremulous with aspiration and with hope. Now she was apathetic and cold, her spirit no more than a handful of ashes.

The silence lengthened—grew heavy with meaning. Alice North put out her hand again: "I trust I haven't intruded—offended?"

"Oh, no," said Sheila stiffly, "you have been very kind, and—I am sure—very wise." But her frank gaze had grown guarded; her whole manner had become that of defensive reserve.

Yes, clearly, the great moment was over; the drama was ended.

"What a queer girl," remarked Mrs. North! to Charlotte, when Sheila had gone. "I predicted a phenomenal future for her—I had her tingling to her finger tips. Then—quite suddenly—the light, the fire was quenched. And do what I would, I couldn't kindle it again. It was very strange—unless——"

"Unless——?"

"Unless she's going to have a child. I told her that she mustn't have children."

"You mean," cried Charlotte incredulously, "that you advised her to shirk the greatest experience possible to a woman? You advised her to forego *that*?"

But Alice North lifted her pretty brows and shrugged her histrionic shoulders with an air of fine distaste. "Really, Charlotte," she drawled, "I hadn't suspected you of being so primitive."

Walking homeward through the sweet summer dusk, Sheila was far from the listless, extinguished creature whom Alice North had described, however. Never in her life had such a tempest of emotion swept through her being. For she was face to face, at last, with life.

The first night of Ted's courtship returned to her now; she smelt the fragrance of climbing roses; she felt his head again upon her breast—the indescribable first touch of love that is unlike all others!—she heard a voice deep within her exulting: "*This is life!*" Ah, how ignorant she had been—how pitifully innocent! To have thought *that* life!

For life was a thing that laid brutal, compelling hands upon you; that destroyed you and created you again; that rent you with unspeakable pangs, with unimaginable terrors, with frantic and powerless rebellions. It was not joy; it was not peace; it was not fulfillment. It was a *force*. Merciless, implacable, irresistible, it seized upon you and *used* you. For that you were put into the world; for that you dreamed and hoped and struggled—for that moment out of an eternity, that moment of *use!*

As she hurried onward, stumbling now and then with a clumsiness alien to her, the sense of lying helpless in the grasp of this force almost drove her to cry out. More than once she lifted her hands to her mouth, and even then little shuddering murmurs broke from her.

Helpless? Oh, yes! yes! For that had come to her from which there was no escape. She was trapped. She, too, was to be put to use. Her own work must make way for Nature's. She saw that now.

Her own work must make way. For Alice North herself had said that one could not serve art and Nature, too—and Nature had exacted service of her. She had been strong enough to defy Ted's tyranny; but, after all, she could not defeat Nature's. Her work must make way.

She let herself noiselessly into the house. From the kitchen floated the sounds of the cook's evening activities, but otherwise the place was silent, and Ted's hat was not on its accustomed hook in the little hall. She could be alone a while.

She stole up the stairs to her bedroom, meaning to lie down in the quiet darkness, but once there, a panic assailed her, a senseless fear of the dim corners, the distorted shadows. Besides, she wanted to see herself; she wanted to see if Ted, promising her beautiful things from motherhood the night before, if Mrs. North, warning her against it to-day, had known that she—that she was going to have a child.

She turned on the lights and stood in their full glare before her mirror. Searchingly she inspected herself—the slender figure that was as yet only delicately rounded, the cheek that showed just a softer curve and bloom, the eyes—

And then she caught her breath in a sharp sob and leaned nearer to her reflection. What was it—who was it—that she saw in her eyes?

For something—some one—looked back at her that had not looked back at her before; something—some one—ineffably yearning, poignantly tender—looked back at her with the gaze of a mystery—of a miracle. It was as if, within herself, she beheld another self; and this other self was reconciled to life, was in harmony with its divine purpose. Strangely enough, at that moment, her childhood's fancy of another self recurred to her.

"Other-Sheila," she whispered, "Other-Sheila, is it *you*?"

While she leaned thus, waiting, perhaps, for the answer of that reflected self, she saw that Ted had opened the door behind her. For an instant their eyes met in the mirror, and with that gaze Sheila's heart suddenly fled home to him. He was the father of her child!

"Oh," she cried, turning to him with outstretched, shaking hands and quivering face, "Oh, tell it to me again! I *want* to believe it! *Tell me again that motherhood is the greatest thing!*"

CHAPTER IX

In that hour when Sheila, flinging herself into his arms, cried out to Ted, "Tell me again that motherhood is the greatest thing. I want to believe it!" she struck a high note that, during the succeeding days and weeks and months, she could not always sustain. And yet, from the moment when she attempted to reconcile her will to Nature's, she did begin to perceive that her sacrifice would have its recompense.

Perhaps she perceived it the more clearly because it was given to her to see what motherhood meant to other women. For she was enough like the rest of humanity to value what others held precious.

On the day after her interview with Mrs. North, Sheila went to confide her expectation of maternity to her grandmother. She found Mrs. Caldwell in her sitting-room, a peaceful, lonely figure, lifted, at last, above the stress and surge of life—and above all its sweet hazards, its young delight. She turned a pleased face to Sheila: "Dear! Ah, what would I do without my child?"

At the words, Sheila's news rushed to her lips: "Grandmother—grandmother—I am going to have a child!" And then she was on her knees, and her face was hidden against Mrs. Caldwell's breast.

There was an instant of silence. Then: "How happy you and Ted must be!" murmured Mrs. Caldwell, "how happy!" And something in her tone touched Sheila more nearly than even her close-clinging arms, something that was at once joy for Sheila's joy and a measureless regret for herself. Suddenly the girl, trembling in the fold of those gentle old arms, realized how far behind her grandmother lay all youth's dear hopes and adventures. And she realized, too, that she herself held treasures in her hands—the treasures of youth and youth's warm love. After all, even if she must lay her work aside, she was happy. Youth and love were hers—youth and love!

Nor was it only from her grandmother that she received confirmation of her fortunate estate. A few days later came Charlotte, to congratulate her upon Mrs. North's belief in her gift.

"Alice North says that you have a wonderful future before you," she told Sheila glowingly. "I'm so glad for you!—so proud of you!"

"Mrs. North said I had a future before me *if I did not have children*," corrected Sheila. "She thinks I can't be a writer and a mother, too."

"Ah," remarked Charlotte reflectively, "then that *was* why—" She paused a moment, leaving the significant sentence unfinished, and then went on more earnestly, "Sheila, she was wrong! Don't be persuaded to her views. She judged you by herself. Probably she couldn't be both writer and mother—she isn't really strong, you know. But that is not true for all women. Why, there have always been women who have done great things intellectually and had children, too! Don't be discouraged; don't let yourself believe that you need lose your art if you should have a child. You'd be all the finer artist for it. And—you are going to have a child, aren't you, Sheila?"

Sheila had been passionately shy about her expectancy of motherhood, but the grave directness of Charlotte's inquiry disarmed her, and she answered as frankly and simply: "Yes, I am going to have a child."

Charlotte looked at her with an expression new to the shrewd blue eyes that were habitually so cool and smiling. Then, with an impetuous and lovely gesture, she drew Sheila to her: "I'm so glad for you, dear!—so glad!"

A little while before she had been glad for the promise in Sheila's work. Now she used the same word, but how differently! For her mind had spoken before, and now speech leaped from her very heart.

"I have never loved a man," she said presently, in her outspoken way, "I have never loved a man, but I hope that I may some day—and that I may have a little child for him."

So Mrs. Caldwell was not alone in her attitude toward love's consummation! The desire for motherhood possessed not only the women of yesterday, of old-fashioned standards and ideals, but Charlotte, too; Charlotte, the "modern" woman incarnate, who had always appeared so self-sufficient, so bright and serene and cold, even so hard. It seemed incredible that she should have confessed to the dreams of softer women, of women less mentally preoccupied and competent.

Sheila stared at her: "*You* feel that way? You—with your music, your chances to study, to make a career for yourself?"

"Of course I feel that way! Every real woman does. I want my music and motherhood, too, but—if I ever have to choose between them—do you doubt that I'll take motherhood?"

There was indignation in her tone; evidently she was wounded that Sheila had misjudged her—so strong was the mother-instinct, the sense of maternity's supreme worth, within her. Realizing this, it appeared to Sheila that no one but herself—no woman in all the world—was reluctant for maternity. After all, Ted had only asked of her that she should share the universal hope and joy of wifedom. It was she who had demanded the exceptional lot; not he who had imposed a unique obligation upon her.

With this conviction, the last flicker of her resentment toward him was extinguished, leaving her gratefully at peace with him, not only in the high moments, but even in those occasionally recurrent ones of rebellion and fear. In the latter, indeed, she turned to Ted now for courage and strength, and in the fullness and tenderness of his response she felt herself more his than she had ever been. But her resolve not to tell him about her talk with Alice North persisted. It had been, at first, the resolution of a determined opposition to his views, but it endured through motives more generous. Ted should have his happiness in approaching parenthood unspoiled. He should not be hurt by knowing that she had ever looked forward to it with a divided heart. She could at least conceal that she was unlike other women, and perhaps, in time, a miracle might be wrought upon her and she be made wholly like her sisters.

Perhaps, too, in the fullness of time, her work and her motherhood might be adjusted to each other in her life. As Charlotte had said, there were women—many of them—who were both artists and mothers. She herself might be such a woman—some day. She might convert Ted to this, and go forward to a destiny of complete fulfillment.

But just now, with a sudden and intense accession of conscience, she yielded herself entirely to the new life that had sprung up within her. The sum of her strength belonged to it, she told herself, and she could give herself as completely as other women, whatever the difference between her mental attitude and theirs. All the while, too, she prayed for her miracle; prayed that she might become altogether like other women, altogether like those glad mothers of the race.

She did not pray in vain. There came a day when, with her little son upon her arms, she whispered, "Oh, I *am* glad! I am *glad*—glad!"

Glad? Ah, that was a poor, colorless word for the rapture that descended upon her. Never was the ecstasy of motherhood granted a woman more utterly. It was like an angel's finger on her lips, answering her questionings, satisfying her longings, silencing her discontents. *This* was life, and it was not cruel and tyrannous, as she had thought, but infinitely gracious and benevolent. It had used her, but it had used her for her own happiness. For upon her arm lay her son!

That she ever could have wanted to escape motherhood, that she ever could have resented it,

now seemed to her unbelievable. She admitted it to be worth any renunciation, and she gave not one regret to the renunciation that she had made for it—the temporary renunciation of her work. It absorbed her fully and gloriously; it flowed through her with her blood; it was a part of her body and the very fiber of her soul. And it shone through her like a light: it was in the softer touch of her hand, the deeper note of her voice, the more brooding sweetness of her eyes. She was motherhood, indeed; a young madonna whose halo was visible even to unimagined Ted.

Had the question occurred to him then, Ted would have said that no artist could surrender herself thus to maternity. Peter Burnett, reverently watching, did say, "No one but a poet could be a mother like that!"

Sheila had been very ill at the time of the child's birth, and a year passed before she regained her natural vigor. It was, perhaps, the happiest year of her life. Every now and then in the course of a lifetime, there come seasons of pure, untroubled joy, when all the practical concerns of ordinary existence pause for a little while, and the petty cares and worries make way, and even the commonplace pleasures stand aside, abashed. Such a season of joy was Sheila's then. She could never recollect it afterward without a quickening and lifting of her heart, and she knew at the time—Oh, very surely—that she had drawn down heaven to herself.

Of course it did not last. As her strength increased and the every day business of living became more and more her affair, she dropped to the level of a normal contentment, and thus to the interests that had occupied her before the miracle was accomplished.

Eric, her little son, was well into his second year, however, before she felt the urging restlessness of her gift, and even then she denied the creative impulses stirring within her; she put them from her—while she longed to yield herself to them instead. "Go away!" she said to them fiercely. "Oh, go away before you spoil my beautiful peace!" But for every time that she drove them forth, they returned the stronger, as if they would proclaim: "You can't be rid of us! You may narcotize us with the sedative of your content. You may banish us altogether. But we'll always waken! We'll always come back! For we're a part of *you*—just as much a part of you as your son is!"

It was true. They were, indeed, a part of her. She would always be different from other women after all—because of them. She would always have to reckon with them; to appease them, or to deny them at her own bitter cost.

And now there came the question: "Why deny them any longer?" Eric had been a very healthy baby from the first; he had, also, an excellent nurse, a young mulatto girl who shared her race's enthusiasm for children. In the kitchen ruled an old cook who brooked no interference from "Li'l Miss." Obviously, neither her child nor her house demanded all of Sheila's time. So in the quiet afternoons, when Eric had been taken outdoors, she began to write for an hour or two. Surely, she argued, she now had a right to those two hours out of each twenty-four, especially since she did not take them from her husband, her son, or her home. It was her own leisure, her own opportunity for rest, that she sacrificed, if sacrifice there was.

But though she justified herself, she somehow said nothing about the matter to Ted. She agreed with him now—Oh, warmly enough!—that motherhood was the greatest thing in life for a woman; but she did not, she never would, believe with him that it must be the only thing. Nor should he believe it always, she told herself. She would prove to him that a woman could be both mother and artist. She would prove it to him, as she had dreamed of doing—but not just yet. They loved each other so dearly, they were so happy together, that she shrank from disturbing their harmony by any discussion or dissension. And discussion and dissension there would be before Ted could be converted. Amiable as he was in his healthy, hearty fashion, he would be intolerant and irritable about this. So she worked on in secret; and for a couple of months nothing and no one was the worse for it.

Then, when Eric was two years old, he was taken ill; suddenly, swiftly, terribly, as a little child can be smitten from rosy vigor to death's very brink. The disease was scarlet fever.

"How can he have gotten it?" Sheila and Ted asked each other, bewildered and agonized. But soon—only too soon—they knew. Lila, the nurse, disappeared directly after the verdict was pronounced. "Afraid!" cried Sheila scornfully, "afraid—though she said she loved him!"

"Yes'm," agreed old Lucindy, who had come from her kitchen to help nurse the boy with a loyalty that was in itself a scathing comment on Lila's defection, "yes'm, she's feared all right—but not ob gittin' fever."

There was something savage in her tone at sound of which Sheila and Ted straightened from their little son's crib and looked to her for explanation.

"She's feared," continued Lucindy, "'cause she knows *she* done gib dat chile fever takin' him to dem low-down nigger shanties she's allus visitin' at. Dat's what Lila's feared ob."

"She took the *baby* to—?" It was Ted who tried to question Lucindy. Sheila could not, though she had opened her dry lips for indignant speech.

"Yassah, she sho did—jes befo' he was took sick. She taken him to 'er no 'count yaller sister's

—an' 'er sister's chillun's got scarlet fever. I heard it dis mornin'."

"Are you sure, Lucindy? Are you *sure*?" It was still Ted who pursued the inquiry.

"Deed I'se sho, Marse Ted. She tole me herse'f whar she'd been when she come back wid de baby, an' 'bout how cute an' sweet dey all say he is. Course she didn't know 'bout de fever—it hadn' showed up on dem chillun yit—but she knowed mighty well Miss Sheila wouldn' want our baby in nigger houses *no-how*. She knowed she was doin' wrong takin' him. I sho did go fo' dat yaller gal, too! She wouldn' never do it no mo'—not while Lucindy's a-livin'!"

Ted turned to Sheila, and the expression of her white face startled him. Much as he loved her, his heart hardened to her as he looked—hardened with a sudden, instinctive suspicion—and when he spoke, his voice was stern:

"Did you know where Lila was taking the baby when she had him out?" he asked. "Sheila, did you know?"

CHAPTER X

"Sheila, did you know?" repeated Ted.

Sheila shook her head. Lila had had orders never to take Eric out of the yard without permission. She had risked the disobedience, only too sure of her mistress's absorption. For Lila knew the secret of those afternoons; she had not been a confidante, but she had been a witness. Sheila realized all this now, as she faced Ted across the crib of their little stricken son. She realized that she had not known where Eric was because she had been engrossed in her work—and that not to have known, as things had come to pass, was criminal.

"Oh, how could it have happened?" cried Ted. And looking into Sheila's tortured face, sternness vanished from his eyes for an instant, and love and grief yearned toward her from them instead. In that instant speech came to Sheila and the truth rushed out of her.

"It happened because—because I was up in my room and didn't overlook Lila. It happened because I was up in my room, *writing a story!*"

It was as if she had bared her breast to a sword—and he could not plunge it in. In his turn he was silent; but his silence was scarcely easier to bear than the harshest upbraiding. He stood there, gazing at her, and she knew all that was in his mind, in his heart. And then, after a moment, he went out of the room, still without a word. When he came back, several hours later, he was very gentle to her, but Sheila knew, nevertheless, that his father's heart condemned her, condemned her as she condemned herself.

Together they nursed their son, with Mrs. Caldwell and old Lucindy to help them. And as Sheila watched her baby fight for the tiny flame of his life, her own heart, so much more burdened than Ted's, broke not once, but a thousand times! He was so small, so weak, so helpless, that little son of hers, and he suffered. That was what she felt she could not bear—that he should suffer. Even his death she could endure if she must, she who deserved to lose him. But his *pain*—!

As she went back and forth upon the ceaseless tasks of nursing, apparently so concentrated upon them, she was in reality living over days long past, the days before Eric's birth. Clear and practical as was her grasp of the present and all its necessities, she was yet obsessed by her memories of that time before her child's coming; by her memories of it and her penitence for it. In the beginning, she had not been glad. It was upon that, quite as much as upon her later carelessness in trusting Lila, that her agonized conscience fixed. How could she ever have hoped to keep her child—she who had not been glad of his coming? It all sprang from that. For if she had been glad enough in the beginning, the idea of writing would not have persisted with her; would not finally have led her to that negligence for which Eric might pay with his life.

She had not been glad in the beginning! Over and over that sentence shrieked through her brain: She had not been glad in the beginning! She had not been glad!

She never spared herself by reflecting that she had not been reluctant for motherhood until Ted had shown his antagonism to the work that was already the child of her brain, and Mrs. North had, from her different viewpoint, justified his attitude. She never conceded in her behalf that it had not even occurred to her, until then, to regard motherhood and art as conflicting elements, and that it was the shock of seeing them thus in her own life that had made her temporarily resentful of maternity. She never excused or exonerated herself by that ultimate joy of motherhood which had possessed her so utterly. She had not been glad in the beginning; later, she had not been glad enough to give him—her little, helpless son—all her life. How, indeed, could she hope to keep him now?

Over and over this she went; and all the while she kept on about her tasks, deft, skillful, terribly calm.

Mrs. Caldwell observed her with an alarm hardly less than she felt for the child. "It will kill Sheila if Eric dies," she said to Ted.

"Yes," he groaned, "I think it will."

"What is it, Ted?—the thing that's eating into her heart? There's more here than even a mother's grief."

"She was writing a story when—when Lila exposed the boy to the fever. Of course, if she hadn't been—! Oh, poor Sheila!—poor Sheila!" he ended brokenly.

For all blame had gone out of Ted; his gentleness to Sheila was no longer that of forbearance, but of an immense and inarticulate pity. It racked him that he could not stand between her and her contrition, her pitiful sorrow; it hurt him intolerably that he could not hold them from her with his very hands. Almost he lost the sense of his own sick pain in watching hers. Once he tried to take her in his arms and comfort her. "Don't suffer so!" he pleaded. "Don't suffer so!"

But she pulled away from him, denying herself the solace of his sympathy. "I can't suffer *enough!*" she cried. "I can *never* suffer enough to atone for what I've done!"

There came a night when they put Sheila out of the room—Mrs. Caldwell and Ted; literally put her out, with hands so tender and so firm.

"I have a right to be with him when he dies!" she cried.

"Sheila—he will need you to-morrow. You *must* rest—for his sake." So they sought to deceive and compel her.

"No," she insisted, "he will not need me to-morrow. But he needs me now—to die with."

"He may not die."

"He 'may' not die. You don't say he *will* not die! Oh, he will die!—and he's too little to die without his mother!"

And then they put her out.

Ted led her away to the room where she was to "rest" and shut her within it, and she lay down on the couch as he had bidden her to do. It was easy enough to be obedient in this, since she was barred out from the one place where she yearned to be. Since she could not be there, it did not matter where she was or what she did. It was easiest just to do what she was told.

She knew only too well that she had spoken truly when she had said that her little son might die that night. She knew only too surely why she had been shut out. And almost she submitted—the blow seemed so certain, so close. The despair that resembles resignation in its apathy almost conquered her, as she waited for the hand of death to strike.

But while she waited, lying in the quiet darkness, there suddenly came to her the idea that she might still save Eric. Morbid from grief and fatigue, she had not a doubt that his death was a "judgment" on herself; a punishment. Because she had neglected him for her own selfish ends; nay, more, because she had not been glad of his coming in the beginning, God was about to take him from her. She was mercilessly sure of this—sure with the awakened blood, the inherited traditions of many Calvinistic ancestors, the stern forefathers of her father. Her own more liberal faith, her personal conception of a God benignant and very tender, went down before that grim heritage of more rigorous consciences. But with the self-conviction springing from that heritage, there came, too, the suggestion that she might make her peace with God; that with sufficient proof of her penitence, she might prevail upon Him to spare Eric.

Again and again the suggestion reached her, in the "still, small voice" which may have been the voice of her own inner self, or of the surviving, guiding souls of her ancestors, or of God Himself. Again and again it spoke to her—whatever it was, from whatever source it rose; again and again, until it was still and small no longer, but strong and purposeful, and its message unmistakable.

She could but heed it—thankfully. And so she began to cast about in her mind for the proof of her contrition. It could be no light thing, no trivial surrender of self. It must be a sacrifice—a sacrifice such as the ancient tribes of Israel would have offered an incensed God. It must be—she saw it in a flash!—it must be her work.

"If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

"And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell."

This, then, must she do. She must pluck out that thing which had offended her, which had betrayed her into a sin against her own motherhood, and cast it from her. She must pluck out her gift and offer it up in expiation.

And so she knelt there in the darkness and tendered her sacrifice; so she thrust from her the thing which had been so dear to her; so she entered into her compact with God.

"Oh, God, grant me my child's life, and I will never write again. I have sinned in selfishness and vanity, but I am repentant and will sin no more. I have plucked out my right eye. I have cut off my right hand. I have cast my gifts from me forever. Grant me my son's life, and I will never write again!"

Hour after hour she entreated God to make terms with her. The night crept by, slow-footed and silent, but she was not aware of the passing of time, or of the deepening of the stillness within the house, or of the quivering of the sword above her head. She no longer listened for sounds from that distant room. She no longer strove to pierce the intervening walls with her mother's sixth sense. She heard nothing but the voice which had counselled her; she strove for nothing but to obey that voice. Her whole being concentrated itself into a prayer. She was conscious only of herself and God, and of her passionate effort to reach Him.

"Oh, God, *hear* me! I have sinned, but I will sin no more. My heart is broken with remorse. I will never write again!"

So she pleaded with God throughout the long night. And pitiful and insolent as was her bargaining, God must have found in it something to weigh.

For with the first light of the morning, Ted opened the door—and there was light in his worn face, too.

"Sheila—*Sheila!*——"

And then they fell into each other's arms, sobbing—sobbing as they could not have done if their little son had died.

CHAPTER XI

With tragic sincerity Sheila had entered into the compact for her son's life, and she kept it to the letter. She saw no reason why she should have a poorer sense of honor toward God than she had toward men and women; her child had been spared to her, and henceforth it was for her to fulfill her part, to keep her given word.

She had never understood, indeed, why people made—and broke—promises to God so lightly. She had found them ready enough to complain if they considered God unjust to them, but they never seemed to think that it mattered whether they were "square" with God or not. To them He was a sort of divine creditor who need not be paid. They even made it a proof of reverence—a comfortable proof!—to place Him far above the consideration they had to show their fellow men. This viewpoint was impossible to Sheila. Morbid, hysterical, as her offered price for Eric's life had been, she felt herself bound, and she paid punctiliously.

It was easy enough thus to pay as she watched her child growing strong and rosy again. His little life—Ah, what was it not worth? A dozen times a day the memory of that night when she had believed that he would die sent her shuddering to her knees with fresh prayers and promises. And always the recollection of that loss escaped roused in her a very passion of thanksgiving. She had her son!—that was her answer to all the dreams which, unrealized, sometimes stole back to tempt her with their wistful faces.

When Eric was well enough for her now and then to leave him—at first she could not leave him lest, with her sheltering hands removed, his life should flicker out—she gave burial to the little brain children that, for the child of her body, she had sacrificed. Every bit of verse, every little sketch, and the unfinished story which was, in her sight, most guilty, and most dear of all, she laid away; not with ribbon and lavender and rites of sentiment and tears, but sternly, barely, ruthlessly, as one puts away things discarded by the heart itself. She might have burned them less harshly, and that she did not was only because she conceived it a finer deed to keep them and resist them. So she put her honor to the uttermost test.

It was thus, and with her own hands, she poured her life into the mould Ted had desired for it; it was thus she thrust from her all that did not pertain to her husband and her child and her home. Yet between Ted and herself not a word about it passed. He never reproached her for what her writing had so nearly cost them; he never asked her to give it up; he never even inquired as to whether she were still pursuing it. He simply stood aloof from that element in her, with what queer mixture of disapproval and pride and magnanimity she could but guess.

They continued to be happy together, the happier as the months passed and Ted saw her more and more his and Eric's. In the beginning he had probably thought that, after the shock of Eric's peril receded, Sheila would try to write again; that fear must have lurked behind his non-committal silence; but time gave him his security about it. Sheila never told him of the compact of that anguished night, but gradually he became as sure that she had given up her talent forever as if he had heard her pledge. "Little wife!" he often called her, "Little mother!" And always it was as if he said to her, "What other name could be half so sweet?"

And she told herself that he was right. Never had there been a better husband. And to be loved by a man like that, a man clean and fine and kind; to be the mother of such a man's child, she was very certain was worth more to a woman than any other honors or fulfillments which life could bring her. She had known that always, even when she first discovered—so bitterly!—that Ted was not in sympathy with her gift and her ambitions; and she knew it more surely as time went on. There were moments when she wished ardently that the sympathy between them had been more absolute; when she thought that, happy as she was, she would have been happier if their tastes had gone hand-in-hand like their hearts. But there was never a time when she would have exchanged Ted for any other man, or when she felt it possible to have done without him. There are women who, married, feed their discontents with visions of what life could have been in freedom or with some other man than they have chosen. Sheila was not of this sort. Having crossed the threshold of marriage, she did not look behind her at the alluring—and elusive—road of might-have-been.

She hoped, now, for other children. With this utter surrender of herself to the woman's life, there came to her the longing for many children, for all her arms could hold. The sum of that creative force which, under different circumstances, would have flowed into her work, all its denied passion and vitality, was transmuted into the instinct of motherhood. Because of her creative gift, there was literally more life within her, more life to bestow, and so, the channel of artistic expression being closed to her, she yearned to spend it all upon maternity; to have, indeed, as many children as her arms could hold.

Had these desired children come to her, peace might have been hers finally and entirely. But the desire was not granted. Eric grew out of his babyhood to a fine, sturdy boyhood, and was still the only child. And now Sheila, a woman of thirty and ten years married, began to feel again, and more strongly than ever in her life, the urge of her gift, the unrest of dreams stifled, thwarted, but never destroyed.

She had made a compact with God, and she continued to keep it; but more and more hunger stared out of her eyes and a nervous restlessness betrayed itself in her manner. She was happy, but she was not satisfied. Something clamored in her unappeased.

If she had lived in a large city, there would at least have been food, if not activity, for that clamoring, aching thing within her. There would have been pictures and music and plays to lift her, at times, into the world of poetic beauty for which she longed. But Shadyville could offer nothing to one of her mental quality; as a girl she had found diversion in its social gaiety, but as a matron, the mother of a nine-year-old son, even the social life of the town was restricted for her to card-parties and the doubtful amusement of chaperonage.

For in Shadyville, the young married people early abdicated in favor of those still younger, those still seeking mates. Society was, in fact, merely a means of finding one's mate, so primitive had the little town remained; companionship between men and women, save as an opportunity for the eternal quest, was unknown. Wives and mothers sat placidly, or wearily, against the walls at dances, watching the game of man and maid, and slaked their thirst for entertainment, for stimulating comradeship, at the afternoon teas and bridge parties of their own sex. Now and then a reading club or a study class was organized, a naïve effort toward an understanding of things which Shadyville vaguely perceived to be of importance beyond its boundaries; and always the class or club died of insufficient nourishment. Within thirty miles of a large town, the life of Shadyville remained uncorrupted—and unimproved; a healthy, simple, joyous affair of the love-quest in youth; a healthy, simple, and usually contented, matter of home-making and child-rearing later. Sheila, having stepped over into the second stage with her marriage, was not supposed to feel any longings which her domestic existence could not satisfy; and feeling them, in defiance of Shadyville's standards and traditions, she could but suppress and starve them.

"Let me go down to the office every day and help you," she suggested to Ted finally, "I used to help you—before we were married."

But Ted, whose limited ambitions had realized themselves and whose work had now settled into a comfortable routine for which he was more than capable, evinced no enthusiasm for the project. She had helped him; he had never forgotten nor disparaged that. But he did not need or want her at the Star office now, and he did need and want her in his home.

"You have enough to do as it is—with Eric and the house," he said.

"But, Ted, I *haven't* enough to do," she insisted. "There's nothing for me really to do in the house. I overlook everything, but that doesn't occupy all my time. And with Eric at school—don't you see, my dear, that it's something to do I need? Don't you see how—how restless I am?"

"We ought to have more children!" he exclaimed wistfully.

"Yes," she agreed, "yes, we ought to have more children. But if they do not come—?" And she stared before her, her hands lying empty and listless in her lap. "If they do not come—?" she repeated presently. And now she turned her brooding eyes to his face and a purpose gathered and concentrated in them. "I wonder if you could understand—" she began.

But he cut into the sentence: "I must hurry back to the office. I take too much time for lunch. Don't get discontented, little girl. I'll take you down to Louisville for the horse show next week. We'll have a bully spree. That's what you need." And he went off whistling blithely, sure that he had solved the problem of Sheila's "moods"—as he always called any symptom of depression in her.

Sheila watched him go, smiling. "Of course he wouldn't have understood," she said to herself. "And how I would have bothered him if I'd tried to analyze myself for him—poor dear!" But the reflection, amused, yet wholly tender, did not end her unrest, her perplexity.

After a futile attempt to interest herself in duties about the house, she set out for a walk, hoping to capture something of the outdoor peace. It was October, always an exhilarating month in Kentucky, with its crisp air and its flaming banners of red and gold, and soon her blood was stirred and her heart lightened, and she was swinging along at a brisk pace. She had started in the direction of her grandmother's house, but suddenly she wheeled about and took to another street.

Never since Eric's illness had her grandmother spoken to her of her writing, and she had been glad of the silence. It seemed to her that if they talked at all, they who had been so close, so much would have to be said; she could not conceive of a reserve in anything which she undertook to discuss with Mrs. Caldwell at all. Ted's views on the duty of a wife and mother would therefore have to be told with the rest, and she did not want to tell them. Her grandmother would have little patience with them, she was sure. As a devoted husband, most of all as the father of Sheila's child, Ted seemed to have won a secure place in Mrs. Caldwell's affection at last, and Sheila, who had clearly seen Mrs. Caldwell's original reluctance to the marriage, had no intention of jeopardizing that place now. Understanding, sympathy, advice would have meant much to her, but she could not take them at Ted's expense.

So she walked on, away from her grandmother's house; onward until she left the town behind her and found herself upon the road leading to Louisville. Just ahead of her, she saw, then, a familiar figure trudging along in leisurely fashion, the figure of Peter Burnett.

"Peter!" she hailed joyously. And as he hastened back to her, her heart lifted buoyantly; her somber mood departed. She did not say to herself, "*Here* is understanding," but she felt it. A sudden warmth possessed her, and that other self of hers, so long banished—the Other-Sheila of dreams and visions—suddenly looked out of her eyes.

"A constitutional?" inquired Peter. And then, to her nod, "May I go with you?"

"Oh, yes, Peter, do! Let's have a good old-time talk! Let's play I'm young again!"

Peter grimaced: "You? You're still a child! But *I*—! It's a sensitive subject with me nowadays—that of youth."

"It needn't be," laughed Sheila. "You've discovered the fountain of eternal youth."

And indeed, Peter at forty-six had changed curiously little from the Peter of twenty-eight. Still slender and of an indolent grace, his aspect of youth had wonderfully persisted. And having passed his life far more in contemplation than in struggle, his face matched his figure with a freshness rare to middle years. He was, it must be admitted, a convincing argument in favor of laziness—except for the expression of his eyes; they had something of the look of Sheila's; their gaze seemed turned inward upon a tragedy of unfulfillment. And unfulfilled, in very truth, was all the promise of Peter's attainments; of his exceptional parts. He was still teaching rhetoric to little girls at the Shadyville Seminary, and, because he had not married, he was still leading cotillions. He read his Theocritus as of old; he called often upon Mrs. Caldwell; sometimes he had an accidental meeting with Sheila, such as this. So his years had passed; too smoothly to age him; too barrenly to content or enrich him in any sense. No one appeared to see his pathos, but pathos was there.

He fell into step with Sheila and they tramped onward together in the cool, bright air, talking with the happy fluency which they always had for each other. And though Sheila said nothing of her problem, her restlessness, she felt all the while the comfort of her companion's understanding sympathy—for anything that she might choose to tell him.

The road rose before them, a gradual, steady ascent; they reached its crest just as the sun grew low and vivid. A glow was upon the autumn fields on either hand; tranquility and silence seemed to be everywhere; tranquility and silence except for a weird crooning that now floated to them, a crooning indescribably mournful. And then they espied, crouching down at the roadside and almost at their elbows, a creature as weird and mournful as the sound.

"Crazy Lisbeth," whispered Sheila.

Lisbeth it was, Lisbeth grown old and more pitiful than ever; a ragged, unkempt being—yet strangely lifted above the sordidness of her rags and her beggar's life by her insanity. Long ago she had ceased to work at all, her poor brain having become incapable of any continuous effort, however simple. But she had resisted the obvious havens of asylum and almshouse, and contrived to live on in liberty by aid of the precarious charity of those who had once employed her. She made her home in any deserted hovel that she could seize upon, going from one to another in a sad progress of destitution. And whenever the days were fine, she still roamed the countryside, a desire upon her that would not let her rest, though her memory of her dead husband and child was now so vague and blurred that she no longer consciously sought them. To-day the desire that so tormented her was allayed. For she held something in her arms, something that she rocked gently as she crooned.

Sheila went a step nearer, but Lisbeth did not look up or appear aware of her presence. She was not aware of anything in the world but the treasure within her arms. Watching, Sheila's eyes filled with quick tears and her throat ached with a pity almost unbearable. For the thing in Lisbeth's arms was a battered doll, and the crooning was a lullaby.

Very softly Sheila turned to Peter. "Let us go back," she said. "She hasn't seen us—she mustn't see us. We must not wake her from her dream. It's a doll she's rocking, and she's dreaming—she's dreaming it's a child."

They started back without speaking, hushed and saddened by what they had seen of another's tragedy; and as they went, Sheila was thinking of the occasion in her childhood when she had pretended to be Lisbeth's little daughter. It had happened so long ago, but in all the years since then Lisbeth had been intent on the one dream, the one hope—that of motherhood. All definite remembrance of the child she had borne and lost was gone from her clouded brain, but the instinct and desire of motherhood had remained; it had been life to her. Her mind, flickering like a will-o'-the-wisp from one uncompleted thought to another, had been steadfast enough in that; her heart, detached from every human tie, had never faltered in its impulse of maternity. The tears filled Sheila's eyes again, filled and overflowed so that Peter gave an exclamation of concern and dismay.

"Poor Lisbeth!" she murmured. "Poor thing! And I who have my child am discontented. What is the matter with me?"

It was the question she had put to Ted long ago—after that other episode of Lisbeth—and he had been as bewildered as she. But there was no bewilderment in the glance that met hers now. Nevertheless, Peter did not answer her directly. But after awhile he said musingly:

"A bird's wings may be clipped, but its heart can't be changed. Always—always—it is mad to fly!"

CHAPTER XII

Mrs. Caldwell had grown very fragile that autumn; not as if she were ill, but rather as if she were gradually and gently relaxing her hold on life. As yet no one but Peter had realized the change in her, but to him it was sadly evident, and he visited her oftener than ever, taking all he could of a friendship that would soon be his no longer. He had stopped to see her on his way home from the seminary, the day after his walk with Sheila, and it was upon Sheila that their talk finally turned.

"I had a stroll with her yesterday afternoon," Peter remarked. "It's rare luck for me to get any of her time nowadays. Marriage swallows women terribly, doesn't it?"

"Sheila's marriage has certainly swallowed her," admitted Mrs. Caldwell. "I'm fond of Ted—really very fond of him, in fact—but I've always expected marriage to swallow his wife. He's that sort of man."

"You think he demands so much of her then? I'd felt that it was the boy who stood between Sheila and all her old life—her old self."

"Ah, but isn't that just the way Ted has her so utterly—through the boy?"

Peter shook his head: "There's something I don't understand. I understand *her*—to the soul! But there's something in her life I don't understand. I'm sure Ted's good to her. I'm sure they love each other. But she's not satisfied, Mrs. Caldwell. The trouble is that she wants to write—and she doesn't. I can't understand why she doesn't. When Eric was a baby, it was natural enough that she should give up everything for him; but now it's unreasonable, it's absurd, that she doesn't take up her work again. And I can't tell her so—well as I know the value of the gift she's wasting.

She isn't frank with me. I can only talk to her about the matter in metaphors."

"She isn't frank with me either, Peter. But I'm a little more informed about the situation than you are. Sheila was writing a story when Eric's nurse, taking advantage of not being overlooked, exposed him to scarlet fever. That, I'm confident, is somehow responsible for Sheila's giving up her work."

Peter's face flushed darkly: "Do you think Ted reproached her for that? Do you think he blamed her?"

"No—I'm sure he didn't. He was terribly, terribly sorry for her. Ted is capable of generosity at times, Peter—I'm not fond of him for nothing!—and he was generous then. But of course Sheila reproached herself. I can imagine what she suffered, and how bitterly she censured herself. I can imagine, too, that she's been atoning ever since. It would be so like her to atone with her whole life for a mistake, an accident. If she had married another man—it wouldn't have happened."

"The mistake, the accident, wouldn't have happened?"

"Ah, that might have happened in any case. I meant the atonement."

"But," objected Peter, "you said Ted did not blame her. How, then, could he be responsible?"

"He could let the atonement go on! He isn't a subtle person, but I believe he's divined that, and let it continue. I knew, before Sheila married him, that he would not care for her art. I knew that he would resent any vital interest she might have outside of her marriage. And knowing this, I've concluded that when her conscience worked along the line of his own wishes, it was too much for him; he simply couldn't help taking the advantage circumstances had offered him."

"Yet you say he is capable of generosity!"

"Capable of generosity *at times*, Peter. And so he is. Most of us have our generousities and our meannesses. Ted's like the rest of us in both respects. The real trouble is that he's the wrong man for Sheila. If she had married you, the same accident might have happened, but the atonement wouldn't. For *you* would have *wanted* her to write; you would have made her feel it wrong *not* to write. It's not that you're a better man than Ted, either; it's that you're a better man for Sheila. You ought to have married her, my dear. I meant you to marry her!"

Peter rose hastily from his chair and walked to the window, standing there with his back to Mrs. Caldwell. Very rigidly he stood, his hands at his side, tightly closed. When he finally turned again into the room, his face was white.

"Why do you tell me that now—now that it's too late?" he asked. And his voice shook with the question.

At something in that white face of his, at something in his unsteady voice, Mrs. Caldwell grew very gentle: "Because I'm a blundering old woman, Peter dear. But, since I have blundered, let us talk frankly. I did intend you to marry Sheila. I plotted and planned for it from the time she was a little girl in your rhetoric class. I believed that in a marriage with you lay her chance to be both a happy and a wonderful woman. And then—Ted married her instead! But there's still something you can do for her. You can watch over her when I'm gone, Peter. You can put out a saving hand now and then, if you see she needs it. When I'm dead—and that will be soon, my dear—you'll be the only person in the world who understands her. If I can feel that you'll always be there ready to help her, I can die in peace. Bottled up genius is a dangerous thing. Sometimes I am afraid for Sheila! But if you'll promise to watch over her for me, I can die with my heart at rest."

"There is nothing I would not do for you or for her!" he said.

"I know that, Peter. What wonder that I had my dreams about you?"

"They were dreams, just dreams," he responded, and now he was speaking more easily. "I wasn't the right man for Sheila after all. If I had been, she would have realized it; she wouldn't have married some one else."

"How could she realize it—at twenty? And she was barely twenty when she married. Peter, there's a moment in a girl's life when, consciously or not, her whole being, soul and body, cries out for love. And if a man is at hand then—any presentable man—to answer, '*I am love*,' she believes him. That moment came to Sheila—and Ted was there!"

"Oh," cried Peter, "Oh, surely there was more to it than that! Surely there was real love!" And when she did not answer, he repeated earnestly, "Surely there was real love!"

"You plead for Ted?" asked Mrs. Caldwell with a touch of irony.

"I plead for her. Ted doesn't matter, and I don't matter. But *Sheila*—Oh, I can't bear that she should have only a second-rate thing, an imitation. I can't bear that."

"She thinks it's real love she feels for Ted. And as long as she thinks so, Peter, she'll be happy. What we have to do for her—what you have to do for her when I'm gone—is to keep her

thinking that. It isn't her baffled gift I worry about; it's the discontent her gift may rouse in her; the awful *vision* it may bring her. I see so clearly how she was married—and she must *never* see! If ever you find her beginning to see, you must blindfold her somehow. I've often thought that women should be born blind—or that their eyes should be bandaged at birth."

"Horrible!" exclaimed Peter.

"No—*kind!* All the creatures of our love would be beautiful then; all the circumstances of our little destinies noble and splendid. We'd create them so in our own minds, and disillusionment could never touch us."

"It's the truth we need, men and women," insisted Peter.

"There's nothing so tragic as the truth—when it comes too late," said Mrs. Caldwell sadly. "Your grandfather and I found out that. He was already married, and I was on the eve of my wedding when—it happened. We might have run away together; ours was a real passion, Peter. But people didn't do that sort of thing so readily in our young days. They thought less of their individual rights then, and more of honor. It seemed to us that it was sin enough ever to have realized what we felt; ever to have acknowledged it. So we went on with our obligations, your grandfather and I. He was a good husband, and I was a good wife. Our lives were cast in pleasant lines, with dear, kindly companions, and we would have been happy if—if I hadn't, in a fatal hour, seen his heart and reflected it for him in my own eyes. We would have been happy if I had been blindfolded! As it was, we'd seen the truth, and to accept less was tragedy for us."

"You were both free at last," said Peter. "Why didn't you—Oh, why *didn't* you—take what was left to you?"

"My dear, we were already old. Romance was still in our hearts, but we hadn't the courage to take it, publicly, into our lives. We had felt a great love, and been brave enough to deny it. But when we could have satisfied it honorably—we were afraid of the change in our lives; we were afraid of our children, of your father and Sheila's; we were even afraid of what the town would say! In the beginning we had striven not to dare. In the end we could not dare. It is sad that we should be like that, isn't it, Peter? It's sad that as the strength of our youth goes from us, the valor of our love should go too. But it is so, it is so for all of us, my dear. The day before your grandfather died, something flamed up in us again. The courage of new life came to him, and he made me promise to marry him the next day. But the next day he was—dead!"

She fell silent, her eyes fixed broodingly upon the fire, eyes that looked strangely young. Peter, silent too, was remembering that day before his grandfather's death; remembering Mrs. Caldwell's presence in the house, and the indescribable sense of some other presence also. He had felt it so strongly, that other presence, that the whole house had seemed to him to be pervaded and thrilled by it. His father was living then, and they two had spent the afternoon in the library, while Mrs. Caldwell had sat with his grandfather in the room above. He had said to his father—he recalled it quite clearly—"I feel something—*something*—in the very air." And his father had appeared startled and had replied, "Perhaps death is in the air." But Peter knew now that it had not been death he had felt; that it had not been death that had filled the air as if with rushing wings and shooting stars and invisible, ineffable glories. It had not been death; it had been love. And glancing at Mrs. Caldwell's musing eyes, something like envy came into his own. He went to her, knelt, and kissed her thin old hand.

"After all, you *had* love," he murmured. And then, "I wish you had been my grandmother. I *wish* you had."

"Oh, Peter!" she cried. "Oh, Peter! Peter!" And suddenly her arms were around his neck.

As she clung to him, her tears on his face and her heart's secret in his hands, he almost told her; he almost said what he had resolved never to say. And yet he did not.

"He's never loved her," concluded Mrs. Caldwell when he had gone. "There was a moment when he looked as if—but he's never loved Sheila. If he'd loved her—ever—he would have told me."

CHAPTER XIII

Had Mrs. Caldwell seen Peter pacing the floor of his little hotel room that night, she would have been less certain that he did not love Sheila. She had said to him, "There's nothing so tragic as the truth—when it comes too late!" And it was this tragedy with which Peter grappled now.

He had not known that he loved Sheila until Mrs. Caldwell told him that he should have married her; but those words had been for him a revelation; an illumination of the last ten years and more. Suddenly he saw, as if a searchlight had been flung upon them, the innermost, secret

depths of his own heart—saw them filled with the image of another man's wife. So swiftly, so entirely without warning had self-knowledge dawned upon him that the cry had been wrung from him, "Why do you tell me this now—when it is too late?" But after the one betraying exclamation, he had put all his strength into the attempt to conceal his discovery. Mrs. Caldwell had spoken of the honor of her generation as of a thing that had not survived, in its purity, to a later one. Yet Peter's sense of honor was too scrupulous to permit him the confession to anyone that he loved another's wife. To the single end of concealment he had set himself through the rest of that interview. He had gone through it as through some nerve-racking nightmare, struggling for self-control as one struggles for safety in dreams of horrid peril.

He must not admit that he loved Sheila! He must not admit that he loved her! That was what he had told himself over and over, fighting all the while for the mastery of his face, his voice, lest they proclaim what his lips did not utter.

Yet in spite of the struggle, in spite of the sense of awful calamity, of absolute wreckage, that had descended upon him, he had been keenly, piteously conscious of every word that Mrs. Caldwell had said; and he had realized fully the impossibility and the irony of the task she had imposed upon him.

Having failed to marry Sheila himself, he must now undertake to keep her in love with the man who had married her! This was all which was required of him; this was *all!* His devotion to Mrs. Caldwell had not faltered; but now, facing his tragedy alone and in the freedom to suffer, he felt a great bitterness toward his old friend for her request. It seemed to him incredibly stupid that she should think for an instant that he, an unmarried man, could assume the post of guardian over a wife's love for her husband. It implied, in the first place, an intimacy which Sheila was far too fine-grained to permit; for however confidential she might become on the subject of her work, she would never be confidential with him in regard to Ted. Whatever he might perceive, she would never give him the opportunity to say to her, "I think that your affection for your husband is waning. Let us put fresh fuel on the fire."

It implied, too, that request of Mrs. Caldwell's, a sharing of Sheila's life which Shadyville would never tolerate; which his own awakened heart could not tolerate. He could not be much with Sheila henceforth. For once, Shadyville's narrow restrictions would be right.

So, he told himself, Mrs. Caldwell had been stupid. And—unconsciously, of course—she had been cruel.

And yet—she was leaving Sheila, leaving her to an essentially alien companion. What wonder that, in her passionate solicitude, she had reached out to the one person whose understanding sympathy she could count upon? What wonder that, however unpractically, she had made an appeal to one whose heart she had divined better than she knew? What wonder, even, that he had made her a sort of promise? "There is nothing I would not do for you or Sheila!" he had said to her; and that was true. There was nothing he would not do for them—if he could. Only—Ted himself must keep what was his own! He had been man enough to win Sheila; now he must keep her!

Ted had been man enough to win her; and he, Peter, had not been! That was what he realized now—with measureless self-scorn. *He* had not even been man enough to know that he loved her; much less man enough to make her his. And now, because he could not make her his, his life was charred to ashes—but his soul was an anguished, unquenchable flame. He had long thought that he knew the worst of himself; his discreditable indolence; his reluctance for effort and conquest; his insufficient courage to follow his emotions into poverty; and that negligible fineness of his which had held him back from advantages that he could not repay with genuine emotion. He had known all that of himself, calling it his worst, and feeling a certain pride in it, too, as in a failure that was of more delicate fiber than the successes of others. But he had never really known the worst of himself until now. For the worst of him was that he had not recognized the true love of his life when it came to him. Those early fancies of his for girls whom he deemed too poor to marry—what had they been but fancies indeed? He had despised himself once or twice for not committing himself, but what was the offense of failing a mere fancy compared to the offense of not recognizing the one true love when it was in his life? He would have had courage enough to follow it to the world's end, in sharpest poverty and hardship, but he had so sheltered himself from any mischance in love that he had not known love when it came. Blind fool that he was, he had not known it when it came!

Even now he could not tell just when it had come. Looking back along the years, it seemed to him to have been there always, for every memory of Sheila, since her little girlhood, took him by the throat.

He saw her as he—and Ted!—had seen her one April day when she was but twelve years old; a slender, black-haired, dreaming-eyed child, lying upon the pale, spring grass and looking up into the flowering cherry-tree branches above her head; a child who was herself an embodied poem, so akin she was to all of April's magic, to the spring's lovely miracles. He saw her, too, in his class-room, eager, earnest, exquisitely responsive to every perception, every thought of his own; a little girl while he was already a man, and yet his comrade, his comrade in every phase of life had he but discerned and willed it! He saw her as a young girl, with her pure eyes and her generous mouth and her sweet, slender throat; a being still untouched by life, but beautifully

ready, touchingly desirous for life's shaping hands. And he saw her as she had been yesterday, walking by his side, the woman at last—yet strangely immature, incomplete. He had thought her immature and incomplete because she had not developed her gift. Now there came to him another thought—bred of all those flashing pictures of her in which she seemed so much his own—the thought that she was incomplete because she had not really loved.

It was impossible that she should really love Ted; Ted who could give neither comprehension nor response to the greater part of her nature. It was impossible! He had felt that at the time of her marriage; he remembered now how resentfully! He had felt it when Mrs. Caldwell had shown him—only too convincingly—how that marriage had occurred. He had cried out to Mrs. Caldwell that Sheila must have loved Ted, but he had realized, then, that she had not. And he realized it now. It had been love's hour with her, but it had not been love. It had not been love because he himself, who could have given her such a love as she needed, who could have compelled such a love from her, had failed her. Back and forth he paced in his little room; a creature caged, not by mere walls, but by an irreparable mistake; a creature agonized and helpless. For it was too late for this vision of utter truth now. His life was spoiled—and hers!

Yes, he had spoiled her life! For a little while, he forgot his own disaster in contemplating hers. He had said that he was not the right man for her; but with all his soul and all his brain and all his blood, he knew that he was the right man for her. Throughout her whole life she had turned to him with that simple trust which is bred of love, or at least of potential love, alone. She had said to him once—long ago—with an innocent and tender wonder, "There is nothing I cannot tell you, Peter—nothing!" And that had been true—until Ted had lured her into bondage. While she had been free, there had not been a door in her heart or her spirit that would not have opened at his touch. She had been his—his for the taking! And he had not taken her.

He had left her to Ted; to Ted for whom so many doors of her nature must be closed forever. He had left her to that most terrible loneliness of all—loneliness in a shared life. The thoughts that she could not speak to Ted—how they must beat about in the prison of her mind; how they must cry for release, for answer! He seemed to feel them against his own temples, those unuttered thoughts that were Sheila's very self; he seemed to feel their ache, their hunger. Nothing would be born of those thoughts now; that gift of expression which had been a part of Sheila's soul would go barren to the grave. This was one of the wrongs he had done her—but it was not the worst.

For the worst that had befallen her through him, he told himself, was not that her gift had missed expression, but that she herself had missed the blinding glory of true love.

She was immature, she was undeveloped, because he had not made her his. And he wanted to make her his. Oh, my God, he wanted to make her his! His life was charred to ashes, but his soul was the quivering, torturing flame of his passion. It would not be quenched; it would not, in the least, be stilled; it drove him about the shabby little room as if it were literally a flame from which he must try to escape—though he knew he could not.

He had broken his heart over the disaster to Sheila's life, but as the night advanced and his passion flared the fiercer in hours securely dark and secret, self rose up within him and shrieked and cursed over his own disaster.

He wanted her! He was forty-six years old; not too old to love, but far, far too old to love calmly. The desires of half a lifetime were in him, desires that had lain low and fed upon his years until, in their accumulated strength, they were terrible—wild beasts that tore him, fires that burned him to the bone. And they were strangely compounded of instincts evil and lawless—when felt for another man's wife—and longings wholly innocent and sweet.

For the first time he longed for a home. He looked about his tiny, dingy room with a feeling of desolation, seeing in his mind so different a place—a home with her. He longed for simple, innocent things—her face across the table from him at his meals; her little possessions scattered about with his; the sound of her step in the rooms around him. And he longed to reach out in the night and touch her; he longed to reach out in the night and take her into his arms. He wanted—and now soul and flesh merged in one flame—he wanted her to bear him a child.

Back and forth he paced, his nails digging into his palms, his teeth cutting his lips, driven by the flame that could never be extinguished, never be satisfied. And all the while, he pictured her in his arms; he pictured her with his child at her breast.

Then, suddenly—and quite as plainly as if he were in the room—he saw *Ted's* child, and he staggered toward a chair and fell, sobbing, into it.

How long those horrible sobs shook him he did not know. He felt himself baffled, beaten, inconceivably tortured. He watched the gray morning steal into the room as one who has kept a death vigil beside his best-loved watches it. A new day had come, but there was no hope in it for him. There was no hope for him—though his days should be ever so many.

He fell asleep at last, sitting there in his uncomfortable chair, with the cold light of the dawn creeping over his haggard face, and he dreamed that Ted came into the room and said, "Sheila needs you. She needs you to keep alive her love for me." And in the dream, he answered, as he

had really answered Mrs. Caldwell the day before, "There is nothing I would not do for her." So vivid was all this that when he opened his eyes and found Ted actually in the room, he was not in the least surprised.

"You left your door unlocked," Ted explained apologetically, "and I came on in. Mrs. Caldwell died in the night—and Sheila's gone to pieces. She's been asking for you. Would you mind going to her for a bit?"

"There's nothing I would not do for her!" replied Peter, in the words of his dream. And for an instant he thought he still dreamed.

"That's awfully good of you. You look done up, Burnett. But if you're equal to it, I'll be grateful to you."

As he gazed at Peter, whose face was gray still, though the morning light was now golden, Ted added to himself, "Poor chap! He's growing old." To him it would have been incredible that Peter's scars had been won in youth's own great battle—the battle with love. A certain complacency stole warmly through him then, ruddy and robust as he knew himself to be, a complacency that led him to lay a kindly, solicitous hand on the older man's shoulder; and so intent he was upon his self-satisfied kindness that he did not see Peter wince at the touch.

"You do look done up, Burnett. Maybe I ought not to ask you——"

But Peter cut him short. "I'd do anything for Sheila," he repeated.

After all, this was left to him, Peter reflected; it was left to him to do things for Sheila. And perhaps he would find nothing she needed of him impossible. The love that had been so dark with the dark and secret hours could have its white vision, too.

CHAPTER XIV

Peter had felt that he could not be much with Sheila henceforth; that neither his own heart nor conventional Shadyville's standards would permit it. But Sheila herself ordained otherwise, and under the circumstances of her bereavement, Peter could but obey her.

Never had Sheila been so lonely as in the weeks immediately following Mrs. Caldwell's death. Whatever reserves of speech had existed between the two in these latter years, there had been no reserve of feeling, of comprehension. Close friends they had always been; and if Sheila was alone in a shared life, so far as her marriage was concerned, she had had a satisfying refuge in her grandmother's sympathetic companionship. Now, with that companionship lost to her, she began to feel, as she had never done before, the limitations of her marriage. Her nervous restlessness increased and sharpened to a positive hunger which Ted's affection and compassion were powerless to alleviate. In her loss and sorrow he could do nothing for her, earnestly as he tried. It was as if he could not reach her, and she realized it with amazement. If he had not compelled from her the greatest passion of which she was capable, he had certainly won love of a kind from her, love warm and sincere, and their life together had bound her to him with such ties of loyalty and habit and common experience, with such dear memories of young tenderness and joy, that she had never doubted the completeness of their union. That he could not reach her now, that he could bring no peace to her in her trouble, seemed to her unexplainable—until she recalled the fact that he and Mrs. Caldwell, though fond of each other, had not been really near each other in spirit. Theirs had been a pleasant, light affection, an amiable, surface relation, bred of the accident of their connection rather than of any genuine attraction between them. Remembering this, Sheila assured herself of its being the reason that Ted could not comfort her for Mrs. Caldwell's death. There was so much in her grandmother that he had never seen, so much of which he could not speak at all.

Peter, on the other hand, had been almost as dear to her grandmother as she herself had been—almost as dear and quite as near. He had a thousand sweet and intimate memories of Mrs. Caldwell, and he suffered, in the loss of her, a grief akin to Sheila's own. So to Peter she turned. With the perfect unconsciousness of self that a child might have shown, she made her demands upon him, upon his pity, upon his time; and if he did not come often to see her, she sent for him.

She was really strangely unworldly, and in this renewed comradeship with her old friend, she saw nothing for anyone to criticize. Neither did she recognize in it any danger for Peter or herself. Peter had always been there in her life, an accepted and unexciting fact. She did not allow for change in him or herself in the ten years of her marriage, years during which they had met but seldom and casually. She had simply resumed the way of her girlhood, her childhood, with him, never considering that it might now be surcharged with peril for them; never for an instant fearing that she might some day find herself unable to do without him. She needed him; he was at hand; and she demanded fulfillment of her need. He brought her the consolation that

Ted could not bring her; he gave her aching heart peace. Repeatedly he displayed a disposition to efface himself, after the first days of her mourning were over, but she would not have it so. In her innocence she still insisted on his frequent presence, and was sometimes puzzled and hurt that he evinced so little gladness in being with her. That he had the look of one harassed almost beyond endurance, she did finally perceive, but she understood it not at all, and at last dismissed it from her mind as something outside her province. Men had worries, worries about money and trivial things like that, she reflected. Peter was probably bothered about something of the sort, something that did not greatly matter after all. A real trouble he would have brought to her; of that she was sure.

So the winter passed in a close companionship between them, and it was to Peter's honor that she knew neither her own heart nor his at the end of it.

Ted it was, and not Peter, who made the situation impossible of continuance. Ted it was who plucked from it, at least for Sheila, its concealing innocence. He had been cordial to Peter; at first he had even been grateful to him, seeing Sheila comforted by him. But after a time he grew tired of Peter's face at his dinner table two or three times a week; he wearied of finding Peter in his little sitting-room whenever he came home particularly early; he sickened, with a sudden and profound distaste, of having Peter drawn into all the intimate concerns and happenings of his own and Sheila's life. Not for a moment did he suspect Sheila of any sentimental inclinations toward Peter, for he fully appreciated and trusted her fidelity. But he thought her behavior foolish and imprudent, and in spite of his trust in her, he *was* jealous of this friendship which so absorbed and satisfied her. Why should she require a man's friendship at all? Why should she require anyone but himself and Eric? And having once questioned thus, his patience speedily gave way, and a climax ensued.

"Sheila," he said to her one day, a day when he had come home to discover Peter reading Maeterlinck to her, "Sheila, why on earth do you have Burnett here so much?"

"Because he's my friend—my dear old friend," answered Sheila, her eyes clear with the surprise of a clean conscience.

"Wouldn't a woman friend do as well?" Ted was trying to hold himself in check, but something in his words or his tone made Sheila stare, and he repeated, with a touch of asperity, "Wouldn't a woman friend do as well?"

"The only woman friend I have whom I really care for is Charlotte—and she won't be here until April."

"Then you'd better wait for her. You'd better wait for her—and see less of Burnett."

"What do you mean?" she asked. And now her puzzled eyes grew steel-cold with intuitive resentment.

"I mean that you'll get yourself talked about if you go on as you're doing at present. A married woman can't be so much with a man not her husband *without* being talked about."

"That is absurd!" she retorted, and her voice was as cold as her eyes; it put miles between them. "Peter has always been my friend. He's been like one of my family to me all my life. He's more than ever like a relative to me now that all my own people are dead. It's absurd to suggest that our friendship could be so misinterpreted. It's *low* to think of such a thing!"

"Low or not, it's *wise* to think of such things. You'll get yourself talked about if I let you. But I'm your natural protector, and I *won't* let you. I forbid you to have Burnett here as you've been doing. *I forbid you!*"

"I am to tell him that?" she inquired scornfully.

"You're to tell him nothing. He'll soon stop coming if he's not asked. The fact is, I don't believe he's wanted to come so often. You're the one to blame, Sheila. You've invited him—you've sent for him when he hasn't come of his own accord." And then, as they faced each other in their unaccustomed hostility, Ted added, with a final flare of wrath, "*You've run after him—that's what you've done!*"

As if he had struck her, Sheila's face went livid, then scarlet. She opened her lips to answer, but no sound came. So, for an instant, they looked at each other, silent, motionless, transfixed by this horror that had risen between them, this horror of anger—almost of hate. Then Ted took a step toward her; already he was contrite: "I didn't mean that. I lost my temper and went too far. Forgive me, Sheila!"

But she did not say that she forgave him. She only said: "Never speak to me of this again—never in all our lives!" And then she turned from him and walked out of the room, leaving him to feel himself far more at fault than he had ever believed her to be.

But though her pride, her insulted innocence, had carried her unbroken through the interview, she was in reality cruelly humiliated. That final sentence of Ted's anger—"You've run after him—that's what you've done!"—rang in her ears for days afterward, shaming her as only

the very proud can be shamed. It was not true of her, she told herself; it was not true—but it was hideous that it could have been said of her nevertheless. That Peter had never thought it of her, she was confident. It was impossible that Peter should misunderstand her in anything. But she dreaded seeing him with the accusation in her mind. She could not meet him now without an acute and painful self-consciousness. Her happy friendship with him was changed, was forever spoiled. At last she wrote to him, telling him not to come to see her for awhile—not to come until she should bid him. After she had sent the note, however, she suffered more than before, feeling that she had brought constraint between them, that she had suggested to Peter, by her request that he stay away from her, the same unworthy thoughts about them that Ted had flung at her. Far, far worse than meeting him was the growing certainty that she had made him self-conscious about their friendship, too; that she had shown it to him as possible of degrading misconstruction. For he would read from her note, carefully though she had refrained from reasons or explanations, just what had happened. Peter would never comfortably miss a thing like that; sensitive and subtle to a degree, he could never be spared by mere omissions, by lack of plain and definite statement.

It was unbearable that such a situation should have come about. Not for a moment did she forgive Ted for creating it. But she lived on with him in cool outward harmony, realizing that in marriage one may have to endure hurt and disappointment, and being much too high-bred a woman to take her revenge in petty breaches of courtesy.

That she was disappointed in Ted, as well as hurt by him, she now admitted to herself for the first time. It is curious how some final and serious issue between two people living together will cast a light on all the past; will disclose anew, and more flagrantly, lapses and shortcomings and injuries that had once seemed trifles and been ignored or condoned or forgotten. Thus Sheila now looked backward along the years of her marriage and saw how Ted had failed her in understanding, in generosity, in any selfless consideration and love. Small instances of his selfishness recurred to her and promptly became as signposts directing her to greater ones. His care for his creature comfort, his innocent vanities, his rather smug pleasure in his success—things which she had smiled over with a tender lenience—served now to remind her that he had never taken any account of her preferences, of her independent possibilities, of her talent; that he had not, at any time, made the least effort to comprehend or share her interests. He had used her in his own work, and he had dismissed hers with a wave of his hand, as he might have pushed away a child's toy. Whatever he had discerned of her mental quality and power, he had regarded only in its relation to himself; if she had been wonderful for him, she had been wonderful as his helpmate, not as the individual. He had wanted her to be wife and mother only, and he had accomplished that. With anything else in her nature, in her life, he had had neither tolerance nor sympathy.

Of course she went too far in her arraignment of him. She forgot, in her sudden bitterness, the warmth and kindness of his heart, the staunchness and integrity of his character, his desire and attempt to shield her from all things harsh and hard—even though he shielded her in his own particular way!—and the very real sincerity of his love for her. She forgot that, by his own standards, his own conception of a husband's duty, he had honestly and steadfastly done his best for her. She saw her whole life fed to his selfishness as to an insatiable monster; and most terrible of all, she knew that she saw too late. Their marriage was made. As a husband Ted was formed and could not be changed. If, in the beginning, she had had a clearer conception of his nature; if she had had a stronger sense of her own rights as an individual and the courage to assert those rights, everything would have been different. She would never have been subdued to mere wifehood and motherhood if that had been. She would never—she saw it now!—she would never have made that compact of renunciation with God!

It was to the matter of that compact she came at last—inevitably. And she said to herself, over and over now, that she would never have made it if she had known herself and Ted better in the beginning. She would never have made it because she would not have seen her work as a guilty thing.

Nor had her work been a guilty thing! No woman watched her child every moment; at least no woman did so who could have the relief of a nurse. She might as readily have been paying an afternoon call or playing bridge when Eric was exposed to scarlet fever. It was just an accident that she had been writing then instead of doing any one of a dozen other things of which Ted would have approved. Yes, it was an accident that she had been writing then, she repeated to herself. But back of that accident had been her morbid conscience and Ted's narrow-mindedness; and together they had translated it into a crime. Thus she had been driven into the compact with God for Eric's life—the compact that had ruined her own life. Her morbid conscience and Ted's selfish narrow-mindedness had wrought together for the frustration of her gift, of her happiness. And it was upon Ted that she put far the greater share of the blame.

Oddly enough, though she saw her husband so plainly now; though she censured his faults so unsparingly and regretted so passionately her own mistakes with him—mistakes of weakness, of cowardly submission, she told herself—she did not, even now, take the final step of considering what might have been if she had not married him; of what might have been if she had married some one altogether more congenial and unselfish.

It was Charlotte who thought of that for her.

CHAPTER XV

It was toward the end of April that Charlotte arrived in Shadyville. She had never lived in Shadyville since her first flight from it to boarding-school. After school had come New York and Paris, where she had studied singing; and for the last five years she had been on the concert stage, filling engagements all over the continent—much to the distress of her family who, though inordinately proud of her, could not understand why any woman with plenty of money at her disposal should work. Charlotte had always decided things for herself, however, and once convinced that her happiness lay in the active pursuit of her art, no one could dissuade her from it. Certainly no penniless woman could have worked harder or with more zest than she. Musician to her finger-tips, and with a remarkably beautiful, silver-clear soprano voice, she had also the modern woman's desire to earn her living; to justify her existence by doing something well. An independent and a busy life was necessary to her, and it was impossible to see her without realizing that she had chosen wisely for herself.

To Shadyville she had always seemed a brilliant figure; now, as a successful professional singer, she was a dazzling one. Even Sheila was a little awed by her, although the two had kept up their childhood's friendship during all these years of separation and of such diverse interests. Every now and then Charlotte descended on Shadyville for a brief visit to her parents, and then she invariably took up with Sheila their dropped threads and wove a new flower into the pattern of their affection. On this occasion she came to Sheila with more than her usual warmth, divining what a grief Mrs. Caldwell's death must have been to her, and she watched her friend, as the days passed, with an increasing solicitude.

To all appearances everything was well with the Kent household. Sheila and Ted seemed to be on the best of terms; Eric had grown into a fine, healthy, handsome little lad, particularly fond of his proud mother; prosperity, as Shadyville measured it, fairly shone from the charming and well-ordered little house. Certainly all appeared to be well with Sheila, yet Charlotte was not satisfied about her. Six months had passed since Mrs. Caldwell's death, and though Charlotte allowed for the sincerity and depth of Sheila's mourning, she rejected a sorrow already somewhat softened by time as sufficient cause for the change she found in Sheila. There was something else, something of an altogether different nature, that was responsible for the hunger of Sheila's eyes, the restlessness of her manner. Charlotte remembered, with a rush of indignation, Sheila's unfulfilled ambitions, her wasted gift. That was the trouble; of course that baffled gift of Sheila's was the trouble. And something must be done about it. She was with Sheila when she came to this conclusion, and immediately she acted on it, impulsive, decisive creature that she was.

"What of your writing, Sheila dear? I can't recall your speaking of it to me for a long, long while."

"Oh—*that's* over!" replied Sheila, with unhappy emphasis.

"But why?"

It was a warm May afternoon and they were sitting on Sheila's veranda. Out on the lawn Eric and another boy of his own age frolicked about like a couple of animated puppies. Sheila pointed to them:

"You remember what Mrs. North said—that a woman couldn't be both mother and artist?"

"I told you that wasn't true!"

"It has been true for me, Charlotte."

"It needn't be now. While Eric was a baby, it may have been true for you, but there's no reason in the world why it should be now."

"Well, it *is* true for me now—it will be true for me always. And yet——"

And then, because disillusion and bitterness were strong upon Sheila, Charlotte got the whole story out of her, from the first revelation of Ted's attitude toward a married woman's art to the final climax of Eric's illness, her self-blame and her renunciation of her work. Even while she told it, she knew that she would reproach herself afterward for disloyalty to Ted, but the sheer relief of confiding it to a sympathetic listener was too much for her scruples.

"I never heard of anything so outrageous in my life!" exclaimed Charlotte, when the story was ended. "It's barbarous—*barbarous!*"

Not a word of her final clear vision of her husband, her belated disappointment in him, had Sheila uttered. For that at least she had been too loyal. But already she repented having betrayed his views in regard to the married woman-artist. So well she knew what Charlotte must think of

them, indeed, that she now felt impelled to a defense:

"Of course it hasn't been Ted's fault—you mustn't feel that he's to blame."

"Mustn't I?" asked Charlotte drily. And then, "My dear girl, he *has* been to blame—absolutely, unforgivably to blame. It makes me wild to think of his narrow-minded, pig-headed selfishness. And that you should have given in to it—! Oh, Sheila, Sheila, where is your independence, your sense of your rights as an individual, a human being? Are you a cave woman—that you should be just your husband's docile chattel?" And Charlotte sprang from her chair and began to pace the veranda, urged by the fierce energy of her anger.

"I said it had been Ted's fault—this spoiling of your life," she went on presently, "but it's been your fault, too, Sheila. It's been your fault for giving in to him."

"But," pleaded Sheila, "I didn't give in to *Ted*. I gave in to circumstances. Seeing that Eric was ill—that he might die—because I'd neglected him in order to write was what conquered me. That was what drove me to the vow to renounce my work—if Eric was spared."

Charlotte came and stood before her then: "Sheila, you know as well as I do that you'd never have made that vow if the sense of Ted's disapproval, his condemnation, hadn't been working on you. You know that it was merely an accident that you were writing when Eric was exposed to scarlet fever. You know that if you *hadn't* been writing, you would have been reading or sleeping or paying calls, and that if you'd been doing any of those things, you wouldn't have thought yourself guilty because you'd taken an hour off from the hardest job a woman has—the mother-job—even though Eric did suffer by it. You know you'd have recognized that there are just so many cruel mischances in life, and that Eric's illness was one of them. You know that it was *Ted*, back of circumstances, that influenced you to make your vow of renunciation!"

It was what Sheila had so recently told herself, and she could not refute it now. Looking into her downcast, acquiescent face, Charlotte continued: "As for the vow—that's nonsense! It's mere morbid, hysterical nonsense. God never exacted it of you. He's never held you to it, you may be sure. If He's wanted anything of you, He's wanted you to use the talent He's given you. If you've been at all at fault, it's for wasting your talent. You *have* wasted it—you've wasted it to please Ted. You've wasted it because you've allowed yourself to be intimidated and bullied by Ted. That's the whole trouble!"

"Oh, Charlotte—," began Sheila.

"I've spoken the truth," insisted Charlotte firmly. "You can't deny a word I've said." And then, flinging out her hands with a gesture of despair, "The worst of it is that it's too late to help matters now. You'll go on in the same way—letting Ted bully you—to the end of your days. There's never been any chance for you with him. Your chance was with Peter Burnett. It's Peter you should have married!"

"You must not say that," objected Sheila quickly—and a little unsteadily. "You must not say that, Charlotte. It's ridiculous. And it's dreadful, too. Ted and I love each other—we *do* love each other!"

But Charlotte was no longer inclined for argument. She answered Sheila's protest with a smile—no more. Suddenly she seemed to be through with the subject of Sheila's life, and perching upon the railing of the veranda, she looked off into green distances with a gaze singularly vague and pensive for her. Sheila watched her admiringly, noting her erect slenderness, her spirited, keenly intelligent face, the clear blue of her eyes, the warm gold of her hair in the sunshine.

"It's you Peter should marry," said Sheila lightly, when the silence between them had lengthened uncomfortably. "You'd be just the wife for him, Charlotte!"

Charlotte turned toward her, and there was no mistaking her earnestness and her sincerity. "I'd marry him to-morrow!" she cried.

"Oh, Charlotte, I never *dreamed—my dear!—*"

"Don't be sorry for me," Charlotte interrupted warningly. "Don't be sorry for me. I may marry him yet!"

And a moment later, she was swinging down the street, as serene and independent as if she had never known—much less, confessed—the pain of unrequited love.

As Sheila looked after her, she noticed again the gold of her hair, the beautiful, free carriage of her shoulders—and now she felt no pleasure in them. Rather was she conscious of a sharp little pang of envy, and with it, sounded the echo of Charlotte's last words—"I may marry him yet!" Charlotte was a splendid, gallant creature; she *might* marry Peter. And then Sheila, feeling that envious pang again and still more sharply, demanded of herself in swift terror: "Am I jealous?—*am I jealous of Charlotte because Peter may come to love her?*"

Oh, it couldn't be that!—it couldn't! It was impossible that she should be jealous about any

man but her husband. For she and Ted loved each other—they *did* love each other, whatever had been their mistakes with each other.

She called Eric to her, and he left his playmate on the lawn and came, smiling. She caught him to her, with a sort of frightened passion:

"Kiss mother, darling!"

He looked back over his shoulder at the boy who was waiting for him. "With him there?" he inquired reluctantly, already shy of caresses before his own sex.

But Sheila, usually the most considerate and tactful of mothers, amazed him now by ignoring his hint. Still with that terrified passion, she kissed him not once, but many times—her son and Ted's! Her son and Ted's! Then, leaving him standing there in his astonished embarrassment, she went into the house and up to her own room, there to sit and stare before her at things unseen, but all too visible to her.

So Ted had been right after all; right in objecting to her being so much with Peter. It *had* been unwise; moreover, it had been wrong, all that companionship of the past winter. For it had brought her to this; it had brought her so to depend upon Peter that she could not be happy unless he was often with her; it had brought her so to care for him that she could not think of him in relation to another woman without jealousy. It had brought her to this—and she was a wife and mother!

She had been ashamed when Ted had told her that she would get herself talked about in connection with Peter, and still more ashamed when he had accused her of "running after" Peter. But that had been an endurable shame, for at the heart of it had been self-respect, the indestructible pride of perfect innocence. But the shame that surged over her now was the agonizing shame of guilt, the shame of utter self-scorn, self-loathing. She—a wife, a mother!—cared for a man not her husband; cared for him in a way that made it torment to her to think of his marrying another woman. Hideous and unbelievable though it was, she cared for him so much. She had cared for him even while she was declaring to Charlotte—and later, to herself—that she loved her husband. She cared for Peter—even now, facing the truth and admitting it, she would not use the word, love—she cared for Peter, and she was Ted's wife, the mother of Ted's son. Not even the touch of that little son had been powerful to blind her. She cared!—she *cared!*

For a moment her face went down into her hands, and the hopeless grief of unfortunate love mastered her, tore her throat with its sobs, burned her eyes with its bitter tears. But presently her head was up again, and with shaking fingers she was bathing her eyes, concealing as best she could the ravages of that instant's surrender. She had no rights in this thing; she had not even the right to suffer. Ted or Eric might come in at any moment, and they must not see that she had wept; she was theirs.

She had no right to suffer. There could be only one right course in this; to fight, to crush out of herself what she was not free to feel, to put between herself and Peter some barrier that could not be destroyed. There was Ted, there was Eric—they should have been barriers enough. But they had not been barriers enough, and there must be another. There must be something—some one—more, to keep her safe, to hold her heart, her thoughts, from this forbidden haven. There must be something—some one—else—. And then her mind leaped to Charlotte. Charlotte loved Peter; she had practically admitted that. Well, she should marry him—as she'd said that she might do. Though it broke her own heart, Charlotte should marry Peter. She herself would arrange it.

She did not pause to consider that Peter might not want to marry Charlotte, that he might not be happy in doing so. She did not pause, yet, to question—she did not dare to question, indeed—whether Peter turned her own love. She was intent upon but one end: to protect herself from what she felt for him, from what she would continue to feel for him as long as he was free.

With this haste and need and fear upon her, she wrote to him, asking him to come to her the next afternoon. It would be their first meeting since Ted's ban upon their friendship, and she realized, with fresh humiliation, that in spite of everything, she was glad of this chance to be with Peter. She realized that she could scarcely wait until the morrow should bring him to her. Because she was thus glad, she almost decided not to send her note after all, and then—lest she would not!—she hurried out and mailed it herself.

Somehow she got through dinner and the evening. She heard Eric's lessons and tucked him away for the night with a bedtime story and the kisses that, when no one was looking on, he was eager enough to receive. She listened to Ted's anecdotes of the day and responded with a mechanical vivacity. Then, at last, she was hidden by the night, freed by the night—though she lay by Ted's side.

She had no right to suffer, but she did suffer now. As Peter had done months before, she suffered through the darkness. But with her there was no yielding to dear visions of a forbidden love, as there had been with him; there was no picturing of life as it might have been with him; no thrilling to the imaginary caresses and delights of a passion which, in her married self, was wholly unworthy. Rather was the night a long battle with the love that it so shamed her to find

within herself. Thus, in this distress of her soul, she was at least spared the physical torture which Peter had endured. Not for an instant was her love for Peter translated, in her mind, into physical terms; she neither imagined nor desired its touch; in her guilt there was a strange innocence—an innocence characteristic of her. She would go through life unaware of the grosser aspects of things; under any circumstances, however equivocal, she would be curiously pure. In one thing only did she fall now to the level of less idealistic beings; in spite of her struggle to the contrary, she wondered, at last, if Peter loved her. She dared and stooped, in the privacy of the night, to wonder that.

When Peter came to her the next afternoon, he found her haggard, but very quiet, very calm. Beneath her calmness, however, he divined the stir of troubled depths, and he carefully kept to the surface; ignored his long banishment; took up one impersonal topic after another for her entertainment; and was altogether so much the safe, unromantic, delightful old friend of the family that, but for the hammering of her pulses, he would have persuaded Sheila that the distress of the past night was a mere, ugly dream. But because she could not look at him without a catch of her breath; because she could not speak to him without first pausing to steady her voice; because all her tranquility was but desperate and painful effort, she knew the night was no dream, but even more of a reality than she had thought.

"Peter," she said at last, with attempted lightness, "Peter, I'm going to meddle with your destiny."

"What do you mean?" he asked, smiling at her.

That smile of his almost cost her her self-control, so dear it was to her. But she went on bravely enough: "I'm going to secure you a wife."

He threw up his hands in dismay. "Don't try," he pleaded. "You could never find a wife to suit me!"

"But I *have* found one who's sure to suit you."

"You've actually selected her?—you have her waiting for me?"

She nodded, trying to smile back at him now with a deceiving gayety.

"May I know who the fair lady is?"

"Of course. She's—Charlotte! She is just the woman for you, Peter."

"Never," he said promptly. "She is charming and clever and handsome and kind, *but*—she's not the woman for me."

"Peter"—and Sheila dropped her pretense of playfulness—"Peter, she's all that you need. She'd make a great man of you."

"At this late date?" he inquired a little ruefully. "She'd make a great man of me at forty-six?"

"Yes, she would. Charlotte's very—strong. She could accomplish anything she wished. She'd do much for a man—with a man—if she loved him."

"I have no reason to believe that she loves me," said Peter.

"Perhaps I shouldn't tell you, but *I* have reason to believe that—she loves you."

He leaned forward and searchingly studied her face: "I'm sure you are mistaken. But—granting that Charlotte may love me—is it for her sake that you want me to marry her?"

"For hers—and for yours. I want to see you in a home of your own, Peter—with a wife to love you, with children. I want—I want you to be happy!"

"I would not be happy if I married Charlotte."

"Why, Peter?"

"Because I do not love her."

"You would come to love her."

"No, Sheila—I am not free to do that."

"Do you—do you love some one else?" And her voice shook now in spite of her attempt to keep it firm.

"Yes," he answered quietly, "I love some one else."

"Some one you can—marry?" She could not look at him, but question him she must.

"No—not some one I can marry."

The room was very still for a moment; but she seemed to hear the sorrow of his voice echoing and re-echoing through it.

"You will get over that in time," she whispered.

"I will never get over it," he answered.

And now she looked at him. She had wondered if he loved her; looking into his sad eyes, she knew. A sob swelled her throat and broke from her lips. And then they sprang up and faced each other.

So they stood, gazing at each other. And though they neither spoke nor touched each other, the heart of each was clear to the other—more clear, indeed, than speech or touch could have made them. So they stood, looking into each other's eyes, and unbearable pain and unbelievable ecstasy were mingled in those few, silent moments. Then the ecstasy died; the pain became cruelly intense. And more than pain shone dark in Sheila's eyes; fear crouched there, and Peter saw it. She loved him—and she was afraid of him. More intolerably than anything else, that hurt him—that she should have to be afraid of him.

"Peter," she said—and her voice trembled so that he could scarcely understand her words, "Peter, I want you to marry Charlotte for—*for my sake*." And her fear stared at him out of her eyes, stared at him and implored him.

She was asking him to put Charlotte between them. He realized that now. She was telling him that Ted and Eric were not enough to keep them apart.

"I will do it—or something which will answer as well," he assured her gently. "You may trust me for that, Sheila."

And then, still without touching her, without even looking at her again, he was gone. He was gone and everything was ended for them—for them who had not known even the beginnings.

CHAPTER XVI

Peter had engaged to dine with Charlotte that night, but after his talk with Sheila, his first impulse was to excuse himself. It seemed to him impossible to get back, at once, to the safe level of everyday life, of commonplace affairs. It seemed impossible, too, to meet Charlotte without betraying embarrassment. But after an hour's solitude, he had sufficient command of himself to fill the appointment, and he appeared at the Davis house with all his usual placidity of manner. After all, he had to go on as if nothing had happened, and it was as well, he told himself, to begin immediately. That was, perhaps, the worst of secret disasters like his and Sheila's—that one had to go on as if nothing had happened; that one had to wear, from the first, a bright mask of concealment. But it was, in a way, the best, too—this necessity for taking up tangible, practical matters, for continuing duties, obligations, enterprises that, perforce, diverted at least a part of one's mind from the contemplation of an inner tragedy. There was effort in having to talk, to listen intelligently, to laugh, but there was relief, too, and the sense of safety that, when adrift on chaotic seas, one feels at the touch of something solid. So he talked and listened and laughed with conscientious care. And watching Charlotte across the dinner table, he considered Sheila's plea.

As he had said to Sheila, he thought Charlotte clever and handsome and kind. Wholeheartedly he liked and admired her; he enjoyed her; he was stimulated by her. He was even prepared to admit that, if she would marry him, she might actually make something of him, middle-aged though he was. His attainments, his really brilliant qualities of mind, were there to build with—and she was, by nature, a builder. He could see her taking hold of his life and creating out of its hitherto negative stuff a thing worth while. He could see her thus active for him and with him, and feel a certain pleasure in the picture. To think of himself as dear to a woman like Charlotte could not but touch a man pleasantly and warmly. And yet, thus touched, thus drawn, he knew still that his whole-hearted admiration and liking would never be followed by whole-hearted love. His passion for Sheila had gone too deep to be effaced. Unhappily for himself, he was not one of those whose heart can be enlisted sincerely more than once. He looked across the table at Charlotte and noted the strong, rich gold of her hair, the dark, definite blue of her eyes, the gracious lines of her shoulders; he heard her clear, positive, courageous voice, her blithe laughter; he looked and listened and thought of her as his—and his heart clung to its dream of a woman far less compellingly vital and lovely. Against Charlotte's vivid reality, he set a little ghost with a pale face and wistful gray eyes and a plaintive voice, a little ghost too sensitive to be quite strong, too shy to be self-confident and self-sufficient, too tender to be altogether brave; and with this very sensitiveness, this shyness, this uncourageous tenderness, the little ghost held him. She held him because her eyes were wistfully gray instead of triumphantly blue, because her voice was hauntingly plaintive instead of firmly buoyant; she held him because in her

soul there was a strain of weakness, of timidity, of childlike helplessness and innocence that to him was at once piteous and exquisite. She held him by all those qualities—and shortcomings—most unlike Charlotte. He saw that Charlotte was, as Sheila had asserted, just the woman for a man of his indolent, dallying temperament; he saw that he needed such a woman. But he saw, too, that Sheila needed him, that she had always needed him, that she would always need him; and from that consciousness of her need he could not wrench himself free.

He would never be free of his little, pale ghost. If he married Charlotte, it would be for Sheila's sake. *If* he married Charlotte—!

Well, he might marry Charlotte. Sheila had said that he could, and perhaps she had been right. In these later years, since Charlotte had been a woman, a cordial friendship had sprung up between them. Whenever she had been in Shadyville, he had been much with her, and in her absences there had been letters. For several years, whether in Shadyville or away, she had been a presence in his life; they had many tastes and interests in common; she was kind to him—encouragingly kind. It seemed probable that he could marry her; at least there was ground for trying to do so. Yet how could he offer less than his best to a creature so fine, so honest, so loyal as he knew Charlotte to be?

That something weighed on his mind, that he was observing her with unwonted gravity, Charlotte perceived before the dinner was over.

Afterward she took him with her into the garden and they sat down there in the mild spring night, surrounded by flowers, regarded by innumerable stars. The night, the flowers, the stars, all appeared to be conspiring for Charlotte. They created an atmosphere of poetry for her; they threw over her a glamour that, with her obvious type of beauty, her downright and positive nature, she had missed. It was as if the night, with its stars and flowers, were striving to invest her with that subtler allurements which, in Sheila, was so poignant and enchanting to Peter. And instinctively Charlotte took up the night's cue; sat a little in shadow; spoke with unusual softness.

"What have you been thinking of so seriously all evening?" she asked.

"I've been wondering," said Peter, "whether a man whose heart is committed, in spite of himself, to a hopeless love, has any right to marry."

Charlotte did not answer at once; she stirred, moved deeper into protecting shadow. "That depends, I believe, on whether he's sure that the love his heart is committed to is really hopeless—will be hopeless always," she replied finally.

"In the case I was considering—the man is sure of that."

"Then he would get over his unfortunate love in time—wouldn't he? Ill-fated love does not often last forever. Life—life is more merciful than that, isn't it?"

It was his chance with her; he realized that she was giving it to him—giving it to him understandingly and deliberately. He had only to agree that an "ill-fated" love—that his ill-fated love—would die at last. But he could not take his chance like that. He could not be less than honest with her.

"He would never get over it altogether," he said. "The woman he could not marry would always be—dearest to him. And, granting that, would it be fair for him to ask another woman to take what was left of—of his affection? Would it be fair to ask her to take—a spoiled life?"

"She might feel that what was left of his life was well worth having—the woman he *could* marry. She might feel that—even if he had suffered much, missed what he supremely wanted—his life need not be spoiled after all. She might feel that she could prevent its being spoiled. If he were frank with her, and she felt like that about it, I think it would be fair for him to marry her—perfectly honorable and fair."

"It could not be happiness for her," argued Peter.

"Perhaps not. Perhaps she could do without happiness."

"That would require a great love of her," said Peter gravely, "a great love for a man who could not give a great love in return."

"Yes," she agreed, her voice very low now, but as clear and steady as ever, "yes, it would require a great love from her. But it is not impossible to find a woman who can feel a great love without hope of a full return."

She was still in her sheltering shadow, but upon Peter's end of the garden seat the moonlight, unchecked by the trees, streamed white and strong. She looked into his face, fully revealed to her now, and she realized, before he spoke, that he was going to refuse her sacrifice; she realized it because she saw in his face a deeper emotion for her than he had ever shown before. He loved her not enough—and yet too much!—to marry her. She saw that and was prepared for his next words.

"To such a woman the man I have in mind could not give less than his best," he said. And there was no longer any question, any hesitancy in his tone. "To one so generous no man could be ungenerous—I should have known that! Perhaps," he went on, with a note of distress and apology, "perhaps such things should not be talked about. Perhaps it is—humiliating—"

"To me the truth could never be humiliating," she answered, with quick reassurance.

"Then it is best to speak it?" he pleaded, as if for self-justification. "Then it is best to speak it, after all? For it does make things—plain; it does show one the right, the decent course."

"It's best to speak it," she assented kindly; and she held out her hand to him.

He lifted her hand and kissed it. And when he spoke again, his voice faltered: "When a man knows a woman like you, Charlotte, he sees that happiness—or unhappiness—doesn't matter so much as he's thought. There are other things—better things—to live for. You've found them—and now I'm going to find them, too, my dear."

So, for the second time that day, Peter went from a woman who loved him. The night and the stars and the flowers had done their best to quicken his pulses; to blur his vision of the truth; to blunt his sense of absolute, unswerving honor. But in the end Charlotte herself had defeated what the night was fain to do for her with its witchery; she had defeated the night's intents with her measureless honesty and generosity—to which Peter's own generosity and honesty could but respond. To use a woman like Charlotte as a barrier between himself and another woman was impossible to him. Neither for Sheila's safety, nor for any benefit to himself, could he do a thing so base. He recognized now that marriage with Charlotte—even without that utter love he had given to Sheila—might be a gracious, even a happy destiny for him. But having found her so ready to sacrifice herself, he could not sacrifice her. He could not rob her of the chance of being loved as she could love. Such a love might come to her some day; he could but leave her free for it.

As he walked homeward along the silent, wide street, other gardens than Charlotte's flung their fragrance to him; the night still whispered to him of the sweetness of being loved, of all those compensations from which he had turned away. But he was not allured; he was not vanquished. His course stretched before him—through the befogging, unmaning sweetness—to daylight and self-respect and an uncompromising sincerity of life. It stretched before him farther than he could descry—as far as the great fighting, suffering, achieving world. Mrs. Caldwell had once told him that he had never grown up, and that some day he would have to grow up; that there could be no escape for him. She had been right about it. Until now he had not grown up. Not even in his love for Sheila and the pain of it, had he grown up. He had been like a child playing in a garden, and though the sweetest rose there had torn him with its thorns, he had stayed on in the garden. But now he was a child no longer; there had been no escape from growing up. He had put it off a long time—more than half his lifetime perhaps—but he had not been able to put it off forever. And now, yielding at last, he was willing to leave his garden; he was willing to go out into the world of men.

As he neared the hotel where he lived, he met Ted Kent, quitting his office—going home to Sheila.

At once Ted stopped and put out his hand. For in his mind no hostility against Peter had lingered. Indeed, on the occasion when he had upbraided Sheila about Peter, he had felt very little animosity toward Peter himself, and several months having passed in a strict compliance to his wishes on Sheila's part, the whole matter had almost vanished from his memory. His was not a nature to cherish resentment, to brood over fancied wrongs; he liked to be at peace with all his fellow-men and upon genial terms with them. He was animated by a distinct cordiality toward Peter now, as he extended his hand to him.

"Been calling on the girls, Burnett?" he inquired jovially.

"On one of them," admitted Peter.

"Well, it's been a long while since I did anything like that—a long while. And I'm not sorry either. There's nothing like your slippers and your pipe and your paper at home! When I have to work late, as I did to-night, it's a real hardship. Have a drink with me before I go on?"

"Thanks," said Peter pleasantly, "but I'm in a bit of a hurry. I've got to pack up. I'm leaving town in the morning."

"Leaving town? For a vacation?"

"No, for work. I've had a job offered me in New York. Brentwood, of the Brentwood Publishing Company, has been asking me to come to them for years, and I've finally decided to go."

"High-brows, aren't they—the Brentwood Company?" Ted questioned, somewhat impressed.

"Perhaps you'd call them so. They publish real literature—a good many translations; that's what they want me for."

"Well, well," pursued Ted, still detaining him, "and so you're going to leave little old Shadyville for good! And after spending all your days here, too—after making so many friends. I believe you'll miss us, Burnett!"

"I'm sure I shall," agreed Peter, with patient courtesy.

"Then why go? It may be a good change for you in ways, but I'm convinced there's more to be said against it than for it. For the life of me, I can't see why you're doing it."

"No," said Peter, a little drily, "you wouldn't see, Kent. But I'm sure it's the only thing to do. Tell Sheila I think so, please, and that I send her my good-byes."

"You aren't going to tell her good-bye yourself?"

"I'm afraid I can't." And as Peter spoke, he was acutely conscious of all that Ted did not see, of all that he would never understand. "I'm afraid I can't—I start early in the morning."

"All right! You know what's best for yourself, no doubt. Sorry you can't say good-bye to Sheila, though—she cares a lot for you, as much as if you were one of the family. I'll give her your message, but she'll be disappointed that you didn't deliver it yourself. Good luck to you, old man, and don't forget us!" And shaking hands again, Ted went cheerfully on his homeward way, serenely unaware of the sorrow—and of the irony!—that had confronted him from Peter's quiet eyes.

Up in his little room, Peter began to carry out his sudden plan for leaving Shadyville. It was true that he had had an offer, more than once, from Brentwood. Brentwood had been a chum of his at college, a friend who had never ceased to remember and appreciate him. The offer was still open, and it solved Peter's problem. He had told Sheila that he would marry Charlotte or do something else that would answer as well. He found that something else in going away.

He had not many possessions; shabby clothes—with an air to them; shabby books—that shone with their inner grace. The books took longest, and when he had finished packing them, it was dawn. He went to his window and watched the slow coming of the light, and in that silent, gray hour, he felt himself more alone than he had ever been. Everything seemed to have been stripped from him; this town where he had been born, and where generations of his family had been born before him; his friends; the little room, so dismantled now, that for years had been his home-place; all these—and his hope of happy love. He remembered how, in his early, romantic boyhood, he had hoped for that—for happy love; and now that hope was gone and everything was gone with it. Everything was gone because of Sheila; he had given up everything that she might be safe, that she might have peace—the peace, at least, of being unafraid. He thought of her now with a calm tenderness—as if, having given so much for her peace, he had somehow gained peace for himself, too. And then he thought of Charlotte, and it was for Charlotte, not for Sheila, that tears—a man's slow, difficult tears—forced themselves into his eyes.

But Charlotte was strong. It was her strength that had roused strength in him; strength to leave the garden, to escape the insinuating, ensnaring sweetness of the night and go forth into the daylight world of men.

And just then the first ray of sunlight touched his window sill, touched it and stole within the room. The day had come; and though he was forty-six years old and not born for fighting, a sudden elation seized upon Peter's sad heart—as if the finger of the sunlight had touched it, too.

CHAPTER XVII

Sheila had thought herself acquainted with loneliness in the days immediately following her grandmother's death—days when she had had the consolation and companionship of Peter's frequent visits; but after Peter left Shadyville, she knew loneliness indeed. Charlotte had taken flight to Paris soon after Peter's departure, and there remained in Sheila's small world not one to comprehend the depths of her, the real needs and desires and aspirations of her mind and spirit.

To all outward seeming, her life flowed on in its usual channels; she occupied herself with her housewifely duties, with her care for her husband's and child's well-being; she exchanged visits with her neighbors and went to afternoon tea-parties. Certainly her life appeared to flow on smoothly enough, but in fact it did not flow at all—that which was really the life current; it was checked, stemmed, thrown back upon itself in a tempestuous flood. Heart, mind, spirit, all had come up against an obstacle which there was no surmounting, no eluding—the indestructible obstacle of a mistaken marriage. Those were the bitterest days of Sheila's existence—the days when all the vital, matured forces of her throbbled and surged and clamored, prisoned things that beat in vain against the walls of circumstances.

Worn out at last by this inner rebellion and conflict, she began to question whether she might

not write once more. What she felt for Peter must forever be suppressed; must, if possible, be crushed out altogether; for her heart, importunate though it was with her woman's maturity, there could be no satisfying outlet. And in her conscientious recognition of this, in her resolution to abide by it, her very genuine affection for Ted—despite all the differences of temperament that divided them, despite even her realization and resentment of the wrong his selfishness had done her—was her greatest source of strength. But though she thus armed herself with her affection for her husband, though she so strove for utter loyalty to him, the suppression of her gift was no part of her conception of wifely duty now. And, thanks to Charlotte, she no longer regarded her compact with God for Eric's life as a thing sacred and binding. Even before Charlotte had expressed herself so vigorously on the subject, Sheila had, indeed, grown to see that her vow to renounce her gift had been unfairly wrung from her by a too effective combination of accident and Ted's opinions. And after Charlotte had cried out upon that vow as "morbid, hysterical nonsense," after she had exclaimed that Sheila's only fault had been in wasting her gift, it was but a step for Sheila to the conclusion that her vow could not—*should* not!—bind her. At last she saw herself free for work, if not for love; she saw herself the more free for work because love must be denied. Her work should be her recompense; she had earned it now, as all things worth the having must be earned—by what one suffers for them. And she believed that her work would be the better for all that she had suffered, all that she had endured. It would be the better for that secret, unceasing ache of her heart for a love forbidden to her; and it would be the better for all the hours of pure suffering for itself alone.

She had suffered for the loss of her work—Oh, very really! Even through years that had been altogether happy otherwise, the restlessness and hunger and depression of a talent unappeased had come upon her at times, come upon her almost unbearably. Though she had set her little son between it and her, it had reached her; it had harassed her unspeakably with demands that she had, perforce, refused to gratify. The sudden note of a violin, the sight of a flowering tree pearly against an April sky, a glimpse of tranquil stars through her window at night—such things as these had been enough to bring her gift's importuning and torment upon her. Earnestly and sincerely as she had tried to steel herself from such importunity and torment, they had come upon her again and again; they still came; they would come always—unless she flung off the shackles of that foolish, unnecessary vow.

Fling off its shackles she did, with a sudden, blessed sense of liberty and strength. With neither confession to Ted, nor any attempt at concealment, she set herself to write. For the first time since her marriage—at least since her motherhood—she felt her life, in some measure, her own. That she made no announcement of her independence to Ted was significant of the complete independence she had begun to feel. Perhaps it was significant of it, also—of the extent to which she conveyed, without words, her emancipation—that Ted, discovering, in the ensuing days, what she was about, said nothing of it either.

When she sat down, at last, to her writing-table, to her clean sheaf of paper, it was with the conviction of her individual rights spurringly upon her. But though she was finally so sure of her right to set free her gift, she felt within her no stir and flutter of a thing mad to fly and now released to do it. No winged words sprang upon her paper to leave bright traces of a heavenly flight. At the end of a long, uninterrupted morning, there was upon her paper no word at all.

Not for lack of ideas did the paper remain thus bare. There were ideas enough and to spare in the treasure chamber of her brain, ideas long hoarded, but still fresh with the glamour of their first conception. There was one idea which had especially tantalized and allured her through years of resistance on her part, an idea for a story really insolently quiet and unpretentious—because its stuff was such pure gold. How that gold would shine through the cunningly chosen medium of her simple, unassuming phrases! She had seen it shining so through all the time that she had resisted it. But now—though she gave herself unreservedly to the cherished idea, though she turned over and over, with a passionate preoccupation, the little golden nugget of it—the simple, delicate phrases that were to reveal, to exploit it, did not appear.

She had always written with a singular ease, and it seemed strange to sit before her tempting pages and write not a word. But on the first morning, she felt no alarm. After all, it was but natural that she should have to spend some time in coaxing it out to the light—that talent of hers so long confined. It was but natural that it should not have courage to soar and sing at once. But on the second day her paper was as empty as before; it lay upon her table like a useless snare for some wild and lovely bird that no longer had vitality enough to flutter within reach of it.

And now, sitting at her writing-table in vain for several days, fear seized upon Sheila, fear that she would not name or analyze.

Well, as one grew older, one often wrote differently, with more difficulty. She had heard that, she reflected eagerly. She had heard that deliberate, intellectual effort had often to succeed the flushed, panting rush of youthful inspiration. This was probably the case with her now; of course it was, indeed. She must undertake the effort; she must accept and master a new method. Then all would be right with her.

And so she went about deliberately translating the gold of her idea into those dreamed-of words which were so fitly to interpret it. She went about it with an energy, a will to accomplish the feat, that should have been sufficient to achieve miracles. If there had been, hitherto, a strain of weakness in her, she was now all strength. And by that sheer strength—of purpose, of

determination—she sought to realize her dream of perfection.

Now the white sheets on her table were no longer barren. Slow, painful writing covered them. She wrote and discarded, and wrote again. Day after day, she sat there at her table, engaged, as she came at last to perceive, in her final, her ultimate tragedy.

For when the thing that she had visioned as a little golden masterpiece was finished, she knew it for what it was. There was no felicity of phrase, no cunning art of construction, no conviction of truth, no throb of vitality within it. As surely as a still-born child had it been brought into the world dead. And it was incredibly ugly and deformed. There was not a gleam of gold upon it!

She recognized all this with unsparing clearness. Not one illusion was left to her, not one merciful deception; with a single glance at her completed story, illusions and self-deceptions were swept from her—and hope was swept from her with them.

Her gift was dead—or, at the least, it was forever ineffectual. There would be no more mad, glad flights; no more songs high in the sunlit heavens. The flights and songs and ecstasies were over for all time. Not for an instant did she cheat herself with sophistries of an eventual recovery. She knew that if it lived at all—this gift of hers which had once been more alive than she herself—it would but live within her as the pain of a thing balked and futile, restless still perhaps, but not restless with any power. Always—always now—the too exquisite note of a violin, the sight of blossoming trees at dawn, of silver, inscrutable stars at night would waken in her the hunger, the grief, of the unsatisfied. There would never be a time when she could look on poignant beauty with the peace of one who is herself a part of all beauty—having created something beautiful. For the ultimate calamity had befallen her; her gift had been killed, or hopelessly maimed.

Under the tremendous impact of this blow she was curiously unresentful. She wondered a little how it had happened. She wondered if she had suffered too much, suffered to the point of numbness—a thing fatal to one whose work had been fine largely through her capacity for emotion; or if the habit, the superstition, of her vow, persisting within her after the vow itself had been cast aside, had thus finally broken the wings of her talent. She wondered if her marriage alone, or her motherhood, or her shamed and hopeless love for Peter had been most disastrous to her. She had been conscious of them all as she had sat there trying to write. Eric's face and Peter's had drifted between her and her pages. Ted's cold declaration that talent was a bad thing for a married woman, and her own impassioned promise to God to renounce her work for Eric's life had both drowned for her the voice of her gift. It was as if all these factors in her destiny had had too much of her; it was as if they had claimed her too entirely and tenaciously ever to release her. Even in silence and solitude and a belated sense of liberty and rights, she could not be free of them. She could not decide whether one or all of them had been responsible for this final frustration. She wondered—and then she ceased to wonder at all. She knew that the frustration had been accomplished—and that she was suddenly too weary even to cry out.

It was at the moment when she realized all this fully, when she sat staring at the deformed and lifeless thing which she had brought forth, that a letter from Charlotte was handed to her. It came from New York—where was Peter. Sheila opened it with shaking fingers—and found what she desired:

I have seen Peter [wrote Charlotte] and he seems to have fitted himself, very happily, into the right place. I say happily, but I do not use the word literally, for Peter is scarcely happy. But he is appreciated here, and he likes his work. I'm sure you'll be glad of that.

As for happiness—I sometimes question whether those of us who catch a glimpse of a happiness perfect and transcendent ever experience the reality. I doubt, in fact, if any reality could stand, unimpaired, by that vision. It may be that we have to choose between the vision—beheld for an instant and forever remembered—and an earthy, faulty, commonplace little happiness. We may have to choose between a fairy tale that can never be anything but a wonderful fairy tale, and a grubby reality that will spoil fairy tales for us evermore. If that be true, Peter is not to be pitied. He is manifestly one of the chosen; he's had his matchless vision; he still believes in the fairy tale.

I told you, once, that I might marry him—in spite of him, as it were! Now I know that I will never marry him. But you must not be sorry for me, my dear. I, too, have had my vision. I'll always believe in the fairy tale.

Sheila laid the letter down—beside the stillborn child of her gift. And fleetingly she saw again the pure gold of her idea—saw it gleaming through the misshapen thing she had actually fashioned. After all, though she could never create masterpieces, she had had her vision of them; that, at least, had been vouchsafed to her. And she had had her vision of the perfect love; not even unspeakable sorrow and humiliation had dimmed it. She, also, was one of the chosen; she would always believe in the fairy tale.

CHAPTER XVIII

It is, perhaps, only after we have put many dreams and hopes behind us that we stumble upon life's real gift to us. And thus it happened for Sheila. It was as if, seeing that she held out her hands for gifts no longer, life capriciously resolved to thrust one upon her. But beneath the apparent caprice was a fine justice—for life was at last kind to Sheila through her son.

As Eric grew older, there sprang up between them such a comradeship as, even in her gladdest moments of motherhood, Sheila had never foreseen. He was a manly boy, fond of other boys and of boyish sports, but for all that his companionship with his mother persisted, and as he matured somewhat, deepened into an intimate, understanding relation such as Sheila had not thought to know again. Their kinship was not of the flesh only; that was the thing that Sheila began presently to see.

It was then that she began to dream once more; to visualize a future beyond her own unrealized future. But she didn't so much as stretch out a shaping hand; she didn't say an illuminating, a determining word. She remembered instances—many of them—of children's lives having been moulded by their parents, and with pitiful mischance. She had known men and women who, with entirely unconscious tyranny, had thrust ready-made destinies on their sons and daughters, saying in extenuation:

"We want our children to do all the brave deeds we've failed to do. We want them to fulfill our defeated ambitions and to become what we have never become. We want to save them from our mistakes and our regrets. We haven't done much with our own lives—but we're going to live again, more wisely and effectually, in our children's lives."

And so they had advised and coerced, and destroyed individuality and independence, and extinguished, only too often, the very joy of life itself by striving to transfer the flame to a vessel of their own choosing.

This she must not do to Eric, Sheila told herself. From the despotic impulse of parenthood—queer mixture that it was of too zealous love and a thoroughly selfish desire for a second chance through the medium of the child—she must protect Eric. Therefore she restrained herself; she simply waited—as she might have waited for a seed to spring up from the secret sprouting place of some deep garden bed. It requires a sort of earthy, benign patience thus to hold back one's hand and passively wait—especially when one has, in spite of oneself, the dominating parent instinct!—but Sheila forced herself to it.

And then, when Eric was fourteen years old, the seed sprang up through the soil and turned its face to the light. The boy came to Sheila one day, obviously bent upon a confidence. Shy, hesitant, shamefaced he was, but so eager. She wanted to kiss him as he stood there before her, awkward and winsome, a little too tall for his knickerbockers, child and adolescent contending in his face and the flush of some portentous thing upon his cheek. She wanted to kiss him—but she didn't. For she divined that the moment was for sterner stuff than kisses.

"Mother, here's—here's a story I've written."

That was all; but Sheila saw her own youth, her hopes, her dreams in his eyes. What there was in her eyes she did not know, but at something there Eric suddenly exclaimed and put his arms around her.

And then Sheila knew that she was crying.

It was not a marvellous story—that first effort of her young son's—but *something was there*; something that raised the crude, immature pages above immaturity and crudity and made the little tale better than itself. And sensing it—that evanescent, impalpable, but infinitely promising thing—she saw the future shining through the present.

But it was not to Eric that she went first with her discovery. She longed to make the boy's path smooth for him before she sped him on it, and so she went first to Ted, story in hand.

Ted had not desired talent in his wife. Would he desire it in his son? Would he cheer and encourage, would he even tolerate, a dreamer, a poet, a worker in mere beauty? Would he ever regard art as more than a shadow of life?

Sheila sought him now to learn that—with Eric's story to plead for itself.

Ted was in his den, a place sacred to those masculine pursuits and possessions which he did not share with her. Only for momentous affairs did she invade the shabby, comfortable, littered room, and now Ted glanced up at her from his pipe and papers with serious expectancy.

"I'd like you to read this," she said, holding out the little manuscript.

"Now? Is it important?"

"Yes, now. It is very important. I must have a talk with you when you've read it."

He took it from her, and she sat down to await his verdict. The story was short. Her suspense could have lasted but a little while. But Eric's fate was at stake, and the minutes seemed as laggard as years.

She had given up her own talent; that it was now a crippled thing within her was because she had renounced it, long before, for Eric's life. But she would not easily sacrifice Eric's talent—if talent he really had. She was prepared to fight for it, if need be. Yet, as she watched Ted, reading with inscrutable face, her heart grew heavy within her for dread of dissension, of struggle between them. That hot, rebellious heart of hers had come at last to a sort of peace. The affection between herself and Ted, in the past few quiet years, had become for her, unconsciously, more and more of a haven. She had given up much to the end that she and Ted might live together in harmony, and she sickened now at the prospect of conflict. For at conflict, old wounds would open, regrets long firmly suppressed would rush upon her, a devastating flood. If she had to fight for Eric, she knew that she would fight with the strength of old bitterness, bitterness that she had striven to outlive. And she could not bear that this should happen. She could not bear that her affection for Ted should be thus jeopardized.

She remembered, as she sat there, the anger she had felt toward him when he had condemned Alice North for her art—and, however innocently, through Alice North, herself. She remembered how indignant she had felt, how hurt and *divided*. And she remembered, too—thinking, against her will, of Peter—how divided from Ted she had felt in later years, in years not so long gone that she could recall them calmly. She remembered how she had come, finally, to see Ted, and his part in the destruction of her talent, all too clearly—and how her heart had turned from him then to one whom she had no right to love. She had driven her heart back to its appointed path; she had constrained it to its duty—in so far as the heart can be constrained. She had even achieved the supreme triumph of keeping alive for Ted, through disillusion and passionate resentment, that very real affection with which they had begun life together—but she trembled now at thought of any further pressure being brought to bear upon it. It was as if she held out her hands to her husband, crying: "Oh, let me love you! Do nothing that shall make it impossible for me to love you!"

And yet—though conflict between them should destroy the love she had so endeavored, in spite of everything, to feel—if Ted opposed Eric's gift, there must be conflict.

For she considered what her own unappeased gift had cost her—the hunger, the restlessness, the pain. She considered how, throughout all the years of her marriage, she had suffered her gift's insistence and its reproach. She thought of how she had never been able to look upon the miracle of the spring, the majesty of the stars, without an aching heart. All beauty had been transmuted for her into unassuageable sorrow—because she had been born to create beauty and had failed of her destiny. And it would be transmuted into sorrow for Eric, too—unless he were given the freedom she had foregone. He, too, would face the stars with an aching heart; all high and exquisite creation would be for him the material of suffering—unless he were allowed to create also.

She had nerved herself to any effort, any struggle that might be necessary, when Ted at last laid down Eric's story and turned to his desk without a word. Was there as little hope as that?

"Ted?" she cried.

"Wait," he answered, rummaging in a drawer of his desk, with his back toward her. And his voice sounded queer—almost as if it were choked with tears. "Wait, Sheila."

He rose, directly, and walked toward her, and his face was queer, too, unsteady with some rarely deep emotion. Thus he had looked when he first bent over her after Eric's birth. That flashed through Sheila's mind, touched her to sudden faith in his being, now, what she prayed to have him. Then she saw that in his hand he had, not Eric's story, but a bulky package of yellowed manuscripts, tied clumsily with a faded ribbon. In such fashion a romantic man might have tied love letters. But Ted was not romantic, and, never having been separated from him at any time since their marriage, she had written him no letters. Besides, these papers were large, business-like sheets. She stared at them curiously. What had they to do with Eric and Eric's future?

But to Ted they had their significance. He carefully untied the dingy ribbon and spread the loosened pages on the table before her—and she noticed that his fingers were shaking.

"Look," he said, in that queer, blurred voice.

She picked up one of the discolored pages—and her own writing confronted her; for the page was from the unfinished story she had been working on when Eric was taken ill with scarlet fever—the story that, in obedience to her vow, she had put aside, still uncompleted.

"Why, Ted—*Ted*—!" But even then she did not understand.

"I found them," he explained, furtively stroking the shabby sheets, but attempting a bluff and

off-hand tone, "I found them—Oh, years ago!—just stuck off in a cupboard *like trash that nobody wanted any more*. And so—because I *did* want them—I brought them down here."

"You wanted them?" Sheila gasped. "But, Ted——"

And then he had her in his arms, and his eyes—full of the tears he had tried to repress—were gazing down into hers!

"Don't you suppose I realize what you might have done? Don't you suppose I've seen what you've given up for me—for me and Eric?"

She could not speak. She could only gaze back at him, incredulous still of the comprehension that he had so long concealed from her.

"I've been a selfish brute, Sheila," he went on. "I've craved all of you for myself and my child, and I've had all of you. It's been my man's way, I reckon, for I couldn't have helped it. If I had it to do over again, it would be just the same—though I'm ashamed of myself now. Of course I didn't ask you to give up your writing, but I'd quite as well have asked you. For I guessed that you'd done it—after Eric had scarlet fever—and I *let* you, without a word. I've let you sacrifice your talent ever since, too—needlessly. Yes, I've *let* you—for I've seen the whole thing."

She had sometimes felt that the tragedy of her life had been in all that Ted had not seen. Now, finding that he had seen so much more than she had ever suspected—so much of what had been profound suffering to her—she might readily have blamed him more than she had ever done before. But generosity rushed out of her to meet his generosity—belated though his was.

"No, no," she interrupted, "it isn't that you let me give up my work. The fault isn't yours. That awful night—when it seemed that Eric would die—I offered my work for his life—I offered it to *God!* That was why I didn't write afterward."

Ted fixed pitying eyes upon her: "You poor little girl! Was it as bad as that with you? I knew I was taking advantage of your conscience, but I never dreamed you'd carried your remorse so far. Did you really believe you had to buy God's mercy? Oh, no, dear. It's only your husband that's seized the opportunity to extract a sacrifice from your Puritan conscience. But with all my selfishness, I haven't stopped you—I haven't been the end of your talent."

She started to tell him of her late emancipation from that unnecessary vow of hers; to tell him that she had tried to write again—and discovered that she could not. But she did not tell him after all. For that could only hurt and shame him—in the hour of his penitence. So she was silent, and he continued with appealing eagerness.

"I haven't been the end of your talent," he repeated. "Don't you realize, dear, that your talent isn't ended at all?"

"You mean—Eric?"

"Yes, I mean that you've handed on your gift to Eric. And he's going to have the chance I wasn't unselfish enough to let you have. Don't be afraid for him—he's going to have his chance, and he'll know what to do with it! I believe you'll be the mother of a great man—and that Eric will probably be the father of great men. I believe it will go on and on and on—what you are, what you might have done."

"But, Ted—Eric is only a child. We cannot be sure yet—"

"I believe!" he insisted. "I believe *this* is to be your work—the work I haven't stopped."

And as she listened, there came to her, too, a faith in Ted's prophecy. Her gift would have its fruition in Eric—and perhaps in Eric's sons and his sons' sons. She was granted a vision of a torch passed on from one trustworthy hand to another throughout the years; and beholding that vision, she was aware that nothing she had suffered mattered at all. She could face the stars now with a heart at peace. She could watch the earth's miracles, feeling herself a part of them. From the earth sprang flowers; from her flesh had sprung her son—her son who had been born to carry on the torch. She had created beauty indeed—beauty that would outlive her life in her son's art.

Even Peter's image was blurred for her as she beheld her supreme vision.

And then she recalled Charlotte's words: "I sometimes question if those of us who catch a glimpse of a happiness perfect and transcendent ever experience the reality. I doubt, in fact, if any reality could stand unimpaired by that vision."

Charlotte was mistaken. There were visions which became realities; this final vision of hers would become a reality—and it would be none the less perfect and transcendent for that.

Sheila laid her hands on her husband's shoulders. "I'm glad that I've lived!" she said. And again, with a little sob, "Oh, my dear, I'm glad that I've lived!"

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TORCH BEARER ***

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