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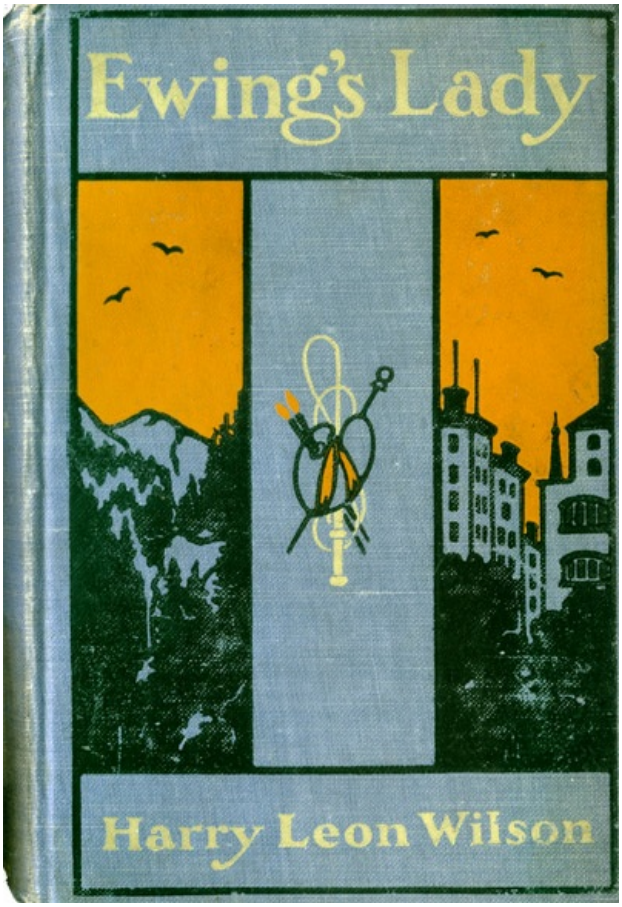

EWING'S LADY

By

HARRY LEON WILSON

Author of "The Spenders"

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

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To N. B. T.

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EWING'S LADY

CHAPTER I

EWING'S KID

TWO weeks of instructive contact with the Bar-7 school of gallantry had prepared Mrs. Laithe to be amazed at her first encounter with Ewing's kid. Riding out from the ranch one afternoon and turning, for coolness, up the wooded mesa that rises from the creek flat, she overwhelmed him at a bend in the trail. Stricken motionless, he glared at the lady with eyes in which she was compelled to believe that she read more horror than admiration. There was a moment of this; then her pony neighed a greeting to the statue—of dusty bronze—as if to say that things were not so bad as they seemed, and the gazing youth broke the spell his vision had laid upon him. He bowed his head doggedly and vanished beyond some low-growing cedars that lined the way.

As he fled the lady laughed softly, yet was silent, with face austerely set as she passed the point of his evanishment. His behavior recalled that of a deer she had terrorized one day in this same green isle of the woods; and she had laughed the same furtive laugh, as if in confidence to [2] herself, when the creature tossed its head in challenge, pawed the earth with a dainty bravado, and then fled in such an ecstasy of panic that she could hear it crashing through the underbrush long after it had vanished. But this human woods-creature had gone silently; and no great way, she suspected—far enough only to screen himself while his eyes still held her through some opening in the green curtain. Wherefore let us comprehend the mien of austerity as she passed.

Elusiveness in the male, be it bluntly said, was confounding to the experience of Mrs. Laithe since she had ventured into the San Juan Mountains under the nominal care of an inattentive brother, and her belief was still firm that the men about her suffered little from shyness. This latest specimen would be a single variation from type and of slight value in determining the ways of his kind.

As her pony picked its way up the trail she mused over the not unpleasant picture of the youth at bay. It was a thing to be caught at the moment, for she would find him otherwise, she believed, at their next meeting. She would come on him some day at Bar-7, or at one of the ranches neighboring it, and find him quite like his fellows, rigidly respectful, but with a self-confidence and a simple directness in his gallantry that had entertained her not a little as practiced by local courtiers. He would be like the others, from Beulah Pierce, owner of Bar-7, down to Shane Riley, humble helper in the cookhouse.

An hour later, refreshed by the balsam-laden air of the upper reaches, she left the woods at the foot of the mesa and rode out on the willow flat, lush with grass for Bar-7's winter feeding. From [3] the first bench above the creek she descried the figures of two men in front of the ranch house. One she saw to be Beulah Pierce, his incredible length draped lazily over the gate that opened into his wife's flower garden. Outside this gate, under the flow of his talk (Pierce would surely be talking) stood one whom the lady, riding nearer, identified as the youth who so lately had shirked a meeting with her. At this sight she warmed with a little glow of pride in her powers of prophecy. Truly he had waited no long time. His hat was off and he leaned restfully against the withers of a saddled horse, a horse that drooped, head to the ground, in some far low level of dejection.

She laughed again, comprehending the fellow at last. His variation from type had been but seeming, due to an erratic but not constitutional embarrassment. Brazenly enough now he contrived to await her coming, craftily engaging the not difficult Pierce in idle talk. And Pierce, as she rode up, would perform, with stiff importance, the orthodox ceremony of presentation. Whereupon the youth would bow with visible effort, shake her hand with a rigid cordiality, once up, once down, and remark, after swallowing earnestly, "Pleased to meet you, ma'am!" or perhaps, "Glad to make your acquaintance!" Then, tactfully affecting to ignore her, he would demand if Pierce had seen anything of that buckskin mare and colt that strayed off last Tuesday; or if anyone had brought mail up from Pagosa Springs lately; or if Pierce happened to need two thousand hemlock shakes. This query he would follow with a popular local witticism concerning sheepmen or the Colorado climate—nominally addressed to Pierce but intended for her own refreshment. And, in readjusting the silk kerchief at his throat, he would manage a quick side [4] glance at her to see how she relished the jest. For Mrs. Laithe had learned their ways in two weeks, and this was one of them—to favor one another with witty sallies in her presence, and solely in her behalf. All the men of Bar-7 practiced this amiable strategy. When a group of them assembled within her hearing the swift exchange of repartee, accompanied by the inevitable side glance, was a thing to wonder at.

Indeed, the lady had learned their ways. Even before she neared the gate Alonzo Pierce, son of Beulah, appeared round the corner of the ranch house to take her pony, sauntering with a flagrant *ennui*, in full knowledge that Sandy Goodhue had started violently on the same gallant mission, but from the farthest corral. Shane Riley, chained by his labors to the doorway of the cookhouse, smirked genially out over a pot that he polished; and Red Phinney, star rider at Bar-7, seated himself on the step before the front door, so that he might have to arise with flourishing apologies—a performance that would move the lady to ask about his sprained wrist, now in

bandage.

This familiar assembling of her court, professedly casual, was swiftly detected by Mrs. Laithe. But she saw now, being near the gate, a quick turning toward her of the strange youth. It was a brief, impersonal survey that seemed not to disengage her from the background of gray road and yellowish-green willows; but clearly it sufficed. With a curt nod to Pierce he was mounted; in another breath his amazed and indignant horse, spurred viciously from its trance, raged with protesting snorts over the road to the east. As Mrs. Laithe reined up at the gate she beheld, through a nimbus of dust, the rider's boots groping pathetically for their stirrups. [5]

She repressed a little gasp of astonishment in which the natural woman might have betrayed her view of so headlong a retreat, although, had Beulah Pierce been alone at the gate, she might have descended to speech with him about this strangely retiring youth. But as 'Lon Pierce waited for her pony, with a masterly taunt for Sandy Goodhue, who came up breathless but late, and as Red Phinney had already risen from his obstructive seat in the doorway, his wrist held cunningly forward to provoke solicitous inquiry, the lady passed in with only such easy words as the moment demanded. She was reflecting, with agreeable interest, that the young man's avoidance of her would presently begin to seem pointed.

This conjecture was to be abundantly confirmed. Returning from her ride the following afternoon, she saw that the youth must pass her on the public highway. They were out on the flat, with no arboreal sanctuary for the timid one. The lady looked forward with genial malice to a meeting which, it appeared, he was now powerless to avoid. But the youth, perceiving his plight, instantly had trouble with a saddle girth. Turning well out of the road, he dismounted on the farther side of his horse and busied himself with the mechanics of proper cinching. As Mrs. Laithe rode by she saw only the top of a wide-brimmed gray hat above the saddle.

The day following, when, in an orderly sequence of events, they should have met at the ford, he turned with admirable promptness down the stream, where no trail was, sharply scanning the thinned edge of a wood in the perfect manner of one absorbed in a search for lost stock. Clearly, his was a mind fertile, if not subtle, in resource. [6]

Not until a day later did he come truly to face her, and then only by the circumstance of his being penned by her within the high-walled corral where Red Phinney broke green horses to ride, work or carry. Returning this day earlier than was her wont, and finding no one at the front of the house to take her pony, she had ridden back to the corrals. Here she delivered the animal to Phinney, but not before the timid one had been compelled to pass her. He did this, she thought, only after swiftly calculating the height of the walls that pent him. And though his hat was doffed as he hurtled by, his eyes were on the ground. Mrs. Laithe, feeling thus at liberty to stare brutally at him, felt a prodigious heightening of that tower of amazement he had been rearing within her mind, for she saw him blush most furiously; beheld it under the brown of his beardless face.

Yet there was more in the young face than this flaunted banner of embarrassment; and scanning it intently, she resolved forthwith to know him.

Late that day she was pleased to come upon Beulah Pierce alone in the big living room of the ranch house. Smoking a last pipe before the call to supper, Beulah relaxed on the "lounge" after a toilsome season of ditch-making.

"Oh, him?" he answered, luxuriously extending legs that seemed much too long for any reasonable need of man, and pulling at his ragged red mustache. "Why, that's Ewing's kid."

"Ewing?" retorted Mrs. Laithe, provocatively, winningly.

"Ewing," affirmed Pierce, with unaccustomed brevity, his mind at dalliance with other matters. [7]

"Ewing's kid," murmured the lady, as if in careless musing.

"Sure, Ewing's kid—Hi Mighty! I struck one o' them willow roots to-day, on that piece o' ditch over on the west forty, an' say! it yanked me clean over the plow handles. It did, fur a fact—straightened me out like a whiplash. It scraped all the wall paper off'n this left shoulder o' mine when I landed, too, say nothin' o' the jounce it give me. Ma, whur's that embrycation fur man *and* beast?" And Beulah laid a gentle hand on the abraded member.

"After you've et a bite," called his wife from the next room. "Shane has the things all on, so come along an' set up."

Beulah erected himself with an unctuous groan and spoke his favorite jest: "Wa'al, le's go out an' see what the neighbors has brought in."

The meal over, Mrs. Laithe again found herself with Pierce in the living room. She sat on the bearskin before the open fire, her hands clasped about her knees. Through the dancing jets of flame she observed the kid of Ewing with his downward, troubled face. Pierce, tucking shreds of tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, glanced toward her, the light of coming talk in his eyes.

"How'd you like that there little red roan you're ridin', Mis' Laithe?" he began.

"Cooney? Oh, Cooney's a dear, generally. Sometimes he's stubborn and pretends to know the way better than I do."

"Sound and kind, though, I bet you."

"Oh, yes; but when I want to ride down the east side of the valley, why does he always try to go up that steep trail to the left? Sometimes I've quite a struggle to keep him in the valley road." [8]

"Wa'al, you see I bought him off'n Ewing's kid an' he wants to git back home. Sure's ever we dast let him loose with the saddle band, he's over to Ewing's place, come sun-up. You give him his head any time—he'll carry you straight there."

"He will?"

"Surest thing *you* know! When that kid breaks a pony he gits it all gentled up so's it hones to git back to him."

"How interesting!"

"Naw—makes lashin's o' trouble fur them that buys off'n him. Say, Mis' Laithe, you was askin' about Ewing's kid."

"Was I?" She looked politely blank.

"Sure you was—jest 'fore supper. Wa'al, Ewing's kid is the son of a man named—now hear me *talk*! Course he's his father's son. Wa'al, anyway, this man Ewing comes in here with this kid about fifteen, sixteen year ago, an' takes that place over there by the lake to git cured up o' the consumption. He was a painter, painted pitchers an' all sech, understand?—puts up a big stoodio with a winder in it six feet high to paint by. But he was puny. He couldn't fat up none. You never seen a critter so gaunted as he was. Some said he never got over losin' his wife. Anyway, 't wa'n't no surprise when he was took off, seven, eight year ago. An' since he died that there kid has sort o' half run the place along with a feller named Ben Crider that the old man had got fur help. O' course we all kind o' looked in on the boy at first to make sure he wa'n't in need, an' done a day's [9] work now an' then, an' they raised a few horses an' a few cattle an' one thing an' another. Trouble with that boy, though, he's always putterin' round with his dad's paint brushes, an' talkin' about portrayin' art an' all like that, understand? I've told that kid time an' time again, 'Kid,' I says, 'never *you* mind about portrayin' art an' depictin' the linnerments an' the varied aspecks o' nature,' I says; 'you jes' burn up them foolish little long-shanked paint brushes in your Charter Oak cookstove,' I says, 'an' ten' to portrayin' a good little bunch of cattle an' depictin' Ben Crider to work also, an' you'll *git* somewhur's,' I says. But him—why, he jes' moons along. An' Ben Crider ain't much better. Ben ain't no *stimulant* to him. Ben had ort to been the only son of a tenderhearted widow lady of means. That's what he'd ort to been. You give him a new coon song out of a Sunday supplement an' his guitar, an' Ben's fixed fur half a day at least. *He* ain't goin' to worry none about a strayed yearlin' or two. Why, one time, I rec'lect——"

"Then young Mr. Ewing is a painter, too?" she interrupted.

"Wa'al"—Pierce became judicial—"yes an' *no*. He ain't a reg'ler one, like you might say—not like his pa was. Still, he can do hand paintin'—if you want to call it that. Made a pitcher o' me this summer, bein' buckjumped by old Tobe. Tobe was cert'n'y actin' high, wide an' handsome, comin' down with his four hoofs in a bunch, an' me lookin' like my works was comin' all apart the next minute. A *lively* pitcher—yes; but, my Lord! it wa'n't a thing you could show! It made me out that reediculous. Course, I ain't Mrs. Langtry, but you got to draw the line somewhurs, hain't you? [10] Now there"—Beulah pushed an informing thumb toward crayon portraits of himself and Mrs. Pierce that graced the opposite wall in frames of massive gilt, one on either side of the organ —"that's what you can call art—drawn by a reg'ler one down to Durango—everything showin' like it ort to, expressions *an'* all, even down to Ma Pierce's breastpin an' my watch chain, made out o' my own mother's hair. They're *decent* pitchers. That other one was plumb indecent, I can tell you. Ma she up an' hid it away, quick as she seen it."

"And has he done other things?"

"Hey?"

"Painted other pictures?"

"Slathers—horses an' animals an' Ben Crider with his gun an' all sech, an' deer. Say now, I seen another artist down to the Durango fair last fall that was a genuine wonder an' no mistake. He was writin' callin' cards at a little table, an' he could draw a runnin' deer all in flourishes an' curlycurves, without liftin' his pen from the card, all slick an' natural as you'd want to——"

"Did you know his mother?"

"No-o-o—didn't even know him. I jest stopped to look an' he drawed a fine big bird right while I watched, havin' a ribbon in its bill with my name on it in red ink; about as tasty a thing as you'd care to see, fur a quarter of a dollar. It's round the house somewhur now, I reckon, if you——"

"Ewing's kid's mother?"

"Hey? Oh, no, I never knew that lady. She passed away sommers off up the state before these other parties moved in."

"Does the boy resemble his father?" [11]

"Ewing? Wa'al, not to *say* resemble. In fact he didn't favor him, not at all, that I can rec'lect. He must of been most like his ma."

The lady had been speaking as from a distance, staring fixedly into the fire, with the distraction of one engaged in some hopeless feat of memory. So intently aloof was she that Pierce had to repeat his next remark.

"I say, you don't never want to let Cooney git you started up that trail you was speakin' about. First place, it's steeper'n the side of a house. Next place, ever let him git you to the top, he'd land you slambang over to Ewing's, spite of all you could do."

"Thank you! I'll be sure to remember that. Good night!"

She left him, still with the far-centered, puzzled look on her face—the shadow of some resemblance, indefinite, nameless, but insistent.

CHAPTER II

[12]

A LADY LOSES HERSELF

ONLY a few miles separate Bar-7 from the Ewing place; but they are interesting miles and at least one of them will be found exciting by the town-bred novice. There is a stretch where the trail leaves the valley road and zigzags up the face of the east bench to a height from which one may survey the whole sleeping valley of the Wimmenuche as through a reducing glass. The way seems no broader than one's hand, and to Mrs. Laithe, who approached it from across the flat and studied it for the first time as a practicable thoroughfare, it looked to be impossibly perpendicular; a climb that no horse in its right mind would attempt, an angle of elevation that no rider could sustain.

Brought to incredulity by this survey, she pulled Cooney to a walk as she neared the parting of the ways. Then, indecisively, she let the bridle rein fall on his neck. The little horse loitered on, splashing through the creek with a few leisurely sips of its icy water (taken merely in the spirit of a connoisseur), and a moment later halted where the bench trail turned out. At the beginning of his intimacy with his present rider he had adopted rushing tactics at this point, leaping at the trail in a fine pretense that no other way could have been thought of, and showing a hurt bewilderment when the sudden pull brought him about and into the valley road. For that was a road that led nowhere, since it led away from his home. Day after day he had played this game, [13] seemingly with an untouched faith that some time he would win. Day after day had he exercised all his powers of astonished protest when the frustrating tug was felt. But these tugs had become sharper, to betoken the rider's growing impatience, and it may be surmised that on this day Cooney had lost his faith. If it were inevitable that one should be whirled back into the broad, foolish way, one might save effort by omitting that first futile rush; one might stop and let evil come. Cooney stopped now, drooping in languid cynicism.

His rider waited, wishing that he had not stopped; wishing he had rushed the trail as always before. She felt the need of every excuse for daring the hazards of that climb. Cooney waited—and waited—morosely anticipating the corrective jerk of a rider who refused to guide him properly by pressing a rein across his neck. The shock was delayed. Cooney thrilled, aspiring joyously. He waited still another uncertain moment, bracing his slim legs. At last, with a quick indrawing of breath, he sprang up the only desirable trail in all the world, with an energy of scurrying hoofs that confined his rider's attention wholly to keeping her seat. She hardly dared look down even when the little horse stopped on a narrow ledge to breathe. Nor did Cooney tarry. Still fearful, perhaps, of that deadly backward jerk, he stopped but once again before the summit was reached. Doubtless he suspected that the most should be made of this probably fleeting mood of compliance in one who had hitherto shown herself inveterately hostile to his most cherished design.

Looking back over the ascent while the stanch little animal panted under her, Mrs. Laithe discovered that the thing had been worth while. The excitement had been pleasurable and the [14] view was a thing to climb for. On the north the valley narrowed to a cañon, its granite sides muffled in clouds of soft green spruce. To the south it widened away until, beyond a broad plain, quickened with flying cloud shadows, a long, low-lying range of blue hills showed hazily, far over the New Mexico border. Straight before her, across the valley, were mountains whose rough summits leaped gray and barren above their ragged hemming of timber—mountains not to be seen from the ranch because of the intervening mesa.

But the picture was not long to be enjoyed—no longer a time than Cooney needed to recover his wind. He was presently off through a sparse grove of aspen, breaking by his own will into a lope as they crossed a wide, grassy meadow, level between the wooded hills that sloped to its edge on either side. And this was the horse who, when he bore her lazily up and down the valley, constantly cropped the good green stuff to right and left, a horse always before willing to loiter, or to stand motionless for an hour with his bridle rein on the ground, while she adventured beyond him on foot. The rider caught his new spirit and laughed as she felt herself hurried to the

consummation of this mild adventure; hurried up the long ridge, over a cross system of sudden gullies, through another wide meadow of the mountains where strange cattle paused to regard her rather disconcertingly; on through the gloom of other woods, the trail worrying itself up another ascent, and then out upon an open summit that looked down upon a tiny lake set in a cup of the hills. On one side the water, its shining surface pierced only by the heaps of hungry trout, flashed the green of chrysoprase up to the spruce trees that crept to its edge; on the other it mirrored a scarred wall of rock that rose sheer from the water to some far, incalculable height, its summit carved into semblances of buttressed castles with gray and splendid battlements. [15]

But Cooney was still loath to linger over mere scenery. He hurried his rider down the ridge and out on a flat of marshy grass, thickly starred with purple gentians. Here he delayed only to recall, as it later appeared, a duty familiar to him in the days before he was sold into bondage. Standing across the trail where it neared the margin of the lake, a sedate-looking cow grazed and was at peace with the world.

Looking up as the horse bore down upon her, and observing that she was expected to move, the cow did so with but slight signs of annoyance in the shaking of her head. The incident, however, was not thus simply to be closed, for now began that which enabled the lady to regard the day as one of red adventure. Cooney swerved from the trail with a suddenness that was like to have unseated his rider. Then as the cow halted, head down and forefeet braced, he swerved once more, heading so obviously for the beast that she turned and trotted off on the trail, mumbling petulant remonstrance. With a knowing shake of his head Cooney fell in behind her.

His intention might no longer be mistaken. He meant to drive the cow. Did she turn aside, Cooney turned aside, ever alert for her slightest deviation. The trail now lay through a grove of spruce and balsam that had been partially cleared, but the trees were still too many for the lady to relish being hurtled among them by a volatile and too-conscientious cow pony. She found herself eying their charge as alertly as did Cooney himself, praying that the driven beast might prove less reluctant. When she did break from the trail Mrs. Laithe braced herself to meet Cooney's simultaneous detour, and thereafter, until the indignant animal was again in the beaten way, the rider was engaged in avoiding fearful impact with trees and entanglement with low-growing branches. She debated the wisdom of dropping from the saddle and abandoning herself to the more seemly fate of starvation in this wooded fastness. To be sure, there was a chance that Cooney would rush on to find his late master, who might return to solve the problem of the empty saddle. But even so, that young man would only glance at her and run swiftly away, after he had blushed. Moreover Cooney, whom she now believed to be demented, had increased his speed, despite her restraining pulls, while the cow, in a frenzy of desperation, became more daring in her sorties. [16]

Then, to the glad relief of the rider, an opening showed through the trees close ahead, and in another moment Cooney had galloped her out into an extensive clearing. Swiftly about its edge he circled, to thwart a last dash of his prey for the glad, free grazing life from which she had so summarily been withdrawn. Half round the clearing they went in the startled gaze of a person who had been at work over a deer hide in the shade of a mighty hemlock. Then, with lightning swerve pursued and pursuers fled straight and swiftly across the clearing—Cooney close on the flanks of his prize—into the astounded vision of Ewing's kid, who had sauntered to the open door at the sound of flying hoofs.

Hereupon the little roan abandoned his task, halting before the figure in the doorway. The halt was so abrupt that Mrs. Laithe never knew whether she dismounted or was thrown. [17]

They looked at each other helplessly, the lady's eyes still wide with the dismay that had been growing in them since Cooney's mysterious seizure. She felt herself trembling and she tried to smile. The young man released the arm he had seized to support her and stepped back, putting a hand up to Cooney, who had been mouthing his sleeve with little whinnies of rejoicing.

Then the lady heard the voice of Ewing's kid, heard him say with quick, embarrassed utterance, "It's too bad you went to all that trouble. We're not milking Clara any more."

Still breathing rapidly, she turned half away, confused by this cryptic utterance.

"Clara?—I didn't know—I don't—I beg your pardon, but I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Yes, we don't drive her in any more. Midge came in fresh a few weeks ago, and we let Clara run along with her calf again."

Pondering this item, she put her hands to her head. One of them found her cap which a low branch had raked awry; the other grasped a tangle of hair that muffled the other side of her head, regrettably out of place. From this surprising touch of things she divined the picture she must be making. More, she saw herself dash into this sylvan opening apparently in mad pursuit of a frenzied cow; for, as a requisite to keeping her seat in the saddle, she had been compelled to seem as eager in the chase as Cooney himself. She sank—collapsed, rather—upon the broad slab of stone before the door, laughing weakly.

The youth looked down at her with puzzled eyes in which she saw alarm rising. [18]

"But I didn't try to chase your cow—I didn't want to," she broke out. "It was your horse; *his* idea, his alone."

There was such fine, shy commiseration in his face as she rose that she laughed again.

"Of course it must have been Cooney's fault," he said. "I might have known that. He used to have to drive her in every day." He regarded her for a moment with a sort of dumb chivalry, then politely offered his hand, saying, with a curious little air of taught formality: "I'm very glad to see you. Thank you so much for coming!"

In avoiding each other's eyes, as their hands fell apart, they both looked out to the person who stooped busily over a deer hide in the shade of the big hemlock. His view of the circumstance was revealing itself. Only his rounded back could be seen, but this rose and fell in the rapid, rhythmic convulsions of silent laughter. They turned quickly back to each other and smiled in a sudden sympathy with his mirth.

"If I may have a glass of water—" she suggested, as a device for establishing ease between them.

"Of course!" He called to the person under the tree, arresting the back at the height of one of its recurrent spasms. The face turned upon them was rigidly sad, a face of almost saturnine solemnity, the face of one who has been brought to view life as an engine of woe. As he ambled dejectedly toward them, his head bowed from his work-bent shoulders, the lines of grief in his face seemed to deepen, and a gnarled hand tugged at the already drooping ends of his long mustache, as if he would be assured that they, also, testified to the world's objectionableness. [19]

"Mr. Crider, this is Mrs. Laithe—she has come to see us." The youth achieved this with austere formality. The sad one nodded and put forth his hand with a funereal "Glad to know you, ma'am!" as if they met at the open grave of a friend.

"Ben, won't you go to the spring and get her some fresh water? She's thirsty. She's had a hard ride."

The other turned quickly away, and there was a sound as if he had manfully stifled a sob. Ewing faced his guest with eyes that twinkled a bit, she thought, beneath their apologetic droop.

"I'd be glad to have you come inside," he ventured.

CHAPTER III [20]

A PRIVATE VIEW

FROM the first room, a kitchen and general living room, such as she had learned to know in the other ranch houses, he conducted her up two steps to a doorway, from which he pushed aside a Navajo blanket with its rude coloring of black and red. There was disclosed beyond this an apartment of a sort with which she was more familiar, a spacious studio with its large window giving to the north. In the clear light her eyes ran quickly over its details: the chinked logs that made its walls, the huge stone fireplace on one side, the broad couch along the opposite wall, covered with another of the vivid Navajo weaves, the skins of bear and lynx and cougar on the stained floor, the easel before the window, a canvas in place on it; the branching antlers over the fireplace, contrived into a gun rack; a tall, roughly made cabinet, its single shelf littered with half-squeezed tubes of paint, a daubed palette, and a red-glazed jar from which brushes protruded. Above the couch were some shelves of books, and between it and the fireplace was a table strewn with papers, magazines, a drawing board with a sheet of paper tacked to it, and half a dozen sharpened pencils.

He indicated the couch. "It will be a good thing for you to rest a little," he said. She seated herself with a smile of assent. He rashly began to arrange the pillows for her, but left off in a sudden consciousness of his temerity, withdrawing a few paces to regard her. He was still [21] apprehensive, but his boy's eyes were full of delight, amusement, curiosity, and, more than all, of a wistfulness like that of a dumb creature. He stepped to the door for the pitcher of water and glass that Ben now brought.

She had studied him coolly as he spoke—the negligent out-of-doors carriage of the figure, not without a kind of free animal grace, the grace of a trampling horse rather than that of soft-going panthers. The floor boards reëchoed to his careless, rattling tread, and occasionally, his attention being drawn to this reverberation, he was at great pains for a moment to go on tiptoe. He was well set up, with a sufficient length of thigh. Mrs. Laithe approved of this, for, in her opinion, many a goodly masculine torso in these times goes for nothing because of a shortness of leg. His hair was a lightish brown and so straight that a lock was prone to come out behind and point uncompromisingly toward distant things. This impropriety he wholly disregarded, whereas the more civilized man would have borne the fault in mind and remembered occasionally to apply a restrictive hand. His face was a long, browned square, with gray eyes, so imbedded under the brow that they had a look of fierceness. His lips showed only a narrow line of color, and trembled constantly with smiles. These he tried to restrain from time to time, with an air of pinning down

the corners of his mouth.

She had noted so much while he poured out the water, and now he came to her, walking carefully so as not to thunder with his boots.

"You must have been frightened," he said, and his eyes sought hers with a young, sorry look.

"Not after we left the woods; it wasn't funny among those trees." [22]

He brightened. "I'd always thought women don't like to look funny."

"They don't," said the lady incisively, "no more than men do."

"But you can laugh at yourself," he insisted.

"Can you?" She meditated a swift exposure of his own absurdity at their meetings in the valley, but forbore and spoke instead of his pictures.

"You must show me your work," she said.

For a moment it seemed that she had lost all she had gained with him. He patently meditated a flying leap through the door and an instant vanishing into the nearest thicket. She had an impulse to put out a hand and secure him by the coat. But he held his ground, though all his geniality was suddenly veiled, while he vibrated behind the curtain, scheming escape, like a child harried by invading grown people in its secret playhouse.

She looked cunningly away, examining a rip in her glove.

"I tried to paint a little myself once," she essayed craftily. Nothing came of it. He remained in ambush.

"But it wasn't in me," she continued, and was conscious that he at least took a breath.

"You see, I hadn't anything but the liking," she went on, "and so I had the sense to give it up. Still, I learned enough to help me see other people's work better—and to be interested in pictures."

"Did anyone try to teach you?" he asked.

"Yes, but they couldn't make me paint; they could only make me see."

"Perhaps you could tell me some things," he admitted at last, "if you've tried." He paltered a little longer. Then, "Ben Crider says this is the best thing I've ever done," and he quickly took a canvas from against the wall and placed it on a chair before her. [23]

She considered it so quietly that he warmed a little, like a routed animal lulled once more into security by the stillness.

"Do you get the right light?" he asked anxiously.

She nodded, and managed a faint, abstracted smile, indicative of pleasure. She heard him emit a sigh of returning ease. He spoke in almost his former confiding tone.

"That's our lake, you know, painted in the late afternoon. Ben is set on my sending it down to the Durango fair next month."

It was the lake, indeed, but, alas! an elaborate, a labored parody of it. The dead blue water, the granite wall evenly gray in shadow, garishly pink where it caught the sun, the opaque green of the trees, the carefully arranged clouds in the flat blue sky—all smirked conscious burlesque. It recalled the things in gilt frames which Mrs. Laithe remembered to have seen in front of "art emporiums," on Fourteenth Street, tagged "Genuine Oil Painting," the "$12.00" carefully crossed out and "$3.98" written despairingly below to tempt the alert connoisseur.

She knew the artist's eyes were upon her in appeal for praise. She drew in her under lip and narrowed her eyes as one in the throes of critical deliberation.

"Yes, I should recognize the spot at once," she dared to say at last. "How well you've drawn the rock."

"I hoped you'd like it. I don't mind telling you I put in a lot of time on that thing. I 'carried it along' as my father used to say. I don't believe I could better that. And here are some others." [24]

He displayed them without further urging, his shyness vanished by his enthusiasm, in his eye a patent confusion of pride and anxiety. She found them in quality like the first. In one the valley of the Wimmenuche from the east bench was as precisely definite as a topographical map; in another the low-lying range of hills to the south had lost all their gracious and dignifying haze.

"They are immensely interesting," observed his critic with animation, "It may be"—she searched for a tempering phrase—"it is just possible there's a trick of color you need to learn yet. You know color is so difficult to convict. It's shifty, evasive, impalpable. I dare say that lake isn't as flatly blue as you've painted it, nor that cliff as flatly pink in sunlight. And those hills—isn't there a mistiness that softens their lines and gives one a sense of their distance? Color is *so* difficult—*so* tricky!"

She had spoken rapidly, her eyes keeping to the poor things before her. Now she ventured a glance at the painter and met a puzzled seriousness in his look.

"You may be right," he assented at last. "Sometimes I've felt I was on the wrong track. I see what you mean. You mean you could reach over a mile and pick up the ranch house at Bar-7—that it's like a little painted doll's house; and you mean you could push your finger into those hills, though they're meant to be a hundred miles away. Well, it serves me right, I guess. My father warned me about color. And I never saw any good pictures but his, and that was years ago. I've [25] forgotten how they ought to look. He sold all his when I was young—all but one."

"You've done well, considering that."

"He said I must learn to draw first—really to draw—and he taught me to do that. I *can* draw. But black and white is so dingy, and these colors are always nagging you, daring you to try them. If I could only learn to get real air between me and those hills. I wonder, now, if my colors seem like those Navajo blankets to you." He flung himself away from the canvases like an offended horse.

"Let me see your black-and-whites," she suggested hastily.

"Oh, those! They don't amount to much, but I'll show you." He thrust aside the canvases and opened a portfolio on the chair.

She saw at a glance that he had been right when he said he could draw. She let her surprise have play and expanded in the pleasure of honest praise. She had not realized how her former disappointment had taken her aback. But he could draw. Here were true lines and true modeling, not dead, as he had warned her, but quick with life, portrayed not only with truth but with a handling all his own, free from imitative touches. He had achieved difficult feats of action, of foreshortening, with an apparently effortless facility—the duck of a horse's head to avoid the thrown rope; the poise of the man who had cast it; the braced tension of a cow pony holding a roped and thrown steer while his rider dismounted; the airy grace of Red Phinney at work with a stubborn broncho, coming to earth on his stiff-legged mount and raking its side from shoulder to flank with an effective spur. There was humor in them, the real feeling in one of the last. Mrs. [26] Laithe lingered over this.

"It's Beulah Pierce's wife in that flower garden of hers," the artist explained. "It seems kind of sad when she goes out there alone sometimes. You know how tired she generally is, and how homesick she's been for twenty years or so—'all gaunted up,' as Ben says, like every ranchman's wife—they have to work so hard. And in the house she's apt to be peevish and scold Beulah and the boys like she despised them. But when she goes out into that garden——"

"Tell me," said his listener, after waiting discreetly a moment.

"Well, she's mighty different. She stands around mooning at the hollyhocks and petunias and geraniums and things, the flowers that grew in her garden back East, and I reckon she kind of forgets and thinks she's a girl back home again. Her face gets all gentled up. I've watched her when she didn't notice me—she's looking so far off—and when she goes into the house again her voice is queer, and she forgets to rampage till Shane Riley lets the stew burn, or Beulah tracks mud into the front room, or something. I tried to show her there, looking soft, just that way." He sounded a little apologetic as he finished.

"It's delightful," she insisted, "and they're all good—I can't tell you how good. You must do more of them, and"—she paused and shot him a careful glance to determine how wary it behooved her to be—"and I believe you should let color alone for awhile, until you've had a teacher show you some things. You must learn the trick."

"Oh, I'd try to learn fast enough, if I had the chance." His eyes lighted with a kind of furtive [27] wistfulness, as if he would not have her wholly fathom his longing.

"Of course you could learn. I believe you can do something—something fine."

She rose from the couch and glanced over his books, with an air of wishing to touch other matters before they dwelt long on this. She noticed with some surprise a set of Meredith.

"Do you read these?" she asked, taking down one of the volumes.

There was an instant return of his former shyness, a hint of the child and the invaded playhouse. But she knew what to do. Without further remark she calmly lost herself in "Diana."

"Those books were my father's," he said at last, with the air of addressing an explanation to some third person. She ignored this, not even glancing at him. "But I've read them," he added, still as if to another person.

At last, after studying her face a bit, he ventured, "Have you read them all?" He spoke low, so as not to interrupt her too pointedly. She did not look up, but nodded, with a smile that said confidentially, "Well, I should think so!" He edged nearer then, like one who would be glad, if pressed, to share his secrets.

"I was sorry when I reached the last one," he began. "It was another world. Oh, he's a great writer. He writes as if he was thinking all the time in fireworks, and he makes you do the same thing. Every page or two he sets off a bunch of firecrackers in your mind that you didn't know you

had there. But he writes as if he didn't care whether anybody understood him or not. It's a blind trail, lots of the way, and on some pages I just bog down."

She smiled sympathetically. "Many of us have that trouble with him." She put "Diana" back on [28] the shelf and held up the poems of Robert Browning.

"And this?"

"Oh, do you read that, too?" he counterquestioned with sparkling curiosity. She could see that he was enlivened beyond his self-consciousness for the moment. "Well, I do, too, in spots. He's pretty good in spots. But other times he's choppy and talky and has a hard time getting into the saddle. Why, sometimes when Ben Crider is talking to himself, it would sound just like Browning, if you broke it up into poetry lengths and gave it a good title."

"And this you like, too?" She was opening a volume of Whitman.

"*Sure!*" he rang out. "Don't you? There's the man." He began walking about with a fine smile that was almost a friendly grin. She felt suddenly sure that he had never talked about the books before, and that it was a kind of feast day for him.

"Yes," he continued easily; "when I get to feeling too much alone up here I pretend I see him striding in off the trail, his head up, sniffing the air, his eyes just *eating* these big hills, and he'd march right in and sit down. Only I can't ever think of what we'd say. I reckon we'd sit here without a word. He must have had wonderful eyes. He's good in winters when you're holed up here in the snow and get on edge with nothing to do for five or six months but feed the stock and keep a water hole open. Sometimes I wonder if Ben and I won't come out crazy in the spring, and then I read old Whitman and he makes me feel all easy-like and sure of myself."

He paused again, but she only waited. [29]

"I had a funny thought last winter," he pursued. "It seemed to me that if people turn into other things when they die—the way some folks believe, you know—that Whitman must have become a whole world when *he* died, whirling away somewhere off in space; a fine, big, fresh world, with mountains and valleys and lakes, with big rivers and little ones, and forests and plains and people, good people and bad people, he just liked all sorts—it didn't seem to make much difference to him what they were, so they were people—and he'd carry them all on his back and breathe in and out and feel great."

He laughed as if the idea still delighted him, and she laughed with him.

"I'd like to have told him that," he continued, almost meditatively. "But I'll bet he often thought of it himself. I guess he wouldn't be satisfied with anything less than that."

When he stopped they stood a moment smiling at each other. Then she went back to the couch with rather a businesslike air.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"I'm twenty-four. How old are you?"

She smiled, quite disarmed by the artlessness of this brutality.

"I am twenty-seven."

"That's pretty old, isn't it?" he commented, gravely. "I shouldn't have said you were older than I am. Some ways you look younger. And what a lot you must have seen out yonder!"

"You should go there yourself, to work, to study." She felt that he was curiously watching her lips as she spoke rather than listening to her.

"Now I see it's only your profile that's sad," he began in the same detached, absent way he had [30] spoken of the books, the way of one talking in solitude. "Your full face isn't sad; it's full of joy; but there's a droop to the profile. Here—I'll show you." He took a sketch-book from the table.

"I'll show you this, now we're such good friends. I could only draw the profile because—well, that was the only thing I could look at much."

She looked and saw herself on three pages of the book, quick little drawings, all of the side face.

"I didn't dream you had seen me enough," she said. "And you have everything from cap to boots, and Cooney——"

"I knew Cooney, and I've—well—I've watched you some when you didn't know."

"Certainly you never watched me when I did know," she retorted.

"I should think not!" He laughed uneasily. "But you see the sadness there. I tried to locate it, but I couldn't. I only knew it was there because I found it in the sketches when they were done. I think I caught the figure pretty well in that one. Stand that way now, won't you?"

She rose graciously.

"Here's your quirt, and catch your skirts the way you've done there—that's it. Yes, I got that

long line down from the shoulder. It's a fine line. You are beautiful," he continued critically. "I like the way your neck goes up from your shoulders, and your head has a perky kind of a tilt, as if you wouldn't be easy to bluff."

She smiled, meditating some jocose retort, but he still surveyed her impersonally, not seeing the smile. She dropped to the couch rather quickly. [31]

"Let us talk about you," she urged. But he did not hear.

"Your face, though—that's the fine thing—" He was scanning it with narrowed eyes. But a protesting movement of hers restored him to his normal embarrassment. He writhed in uncomfortable apology before her. "I'd 'most forgot you were really here," he explained. "I've seen you that way so often when you *weren't* here. There now—I see that sadness; it's in the upper lip. It showed even when you laughed then."

"Really, this must stop," she broke in. "People don't talk this way."

"Don't they? Why don't they? I'm sorry—but all that interested me." The wave of his hand indicated the fluent grace of the lady impartially from head to foot.

"Of course," he added, "I knew there must be people like you, out there, but I never dreamed I'd have one of them close enough to look at—let alone get friendly with. I hope you won't hold it against me."

CHAPTER IV [32]

A PORTRAIT

THOUGH she had made him tingle with an impulse to flee from her, he was at the edge of the east bench early the next afternoon. He might see her from a distance. If she came close upon him—well, it was worth risking; he had a good horse. Her eyes were the best of her he thought, big gray things under black brows, with a dark ring, well defined, about the iris. He had seen no such eyes before. And how they lighted her face when she spoke. Her face needed lighting, he thought. It was pale under the dark hair—her hair stopped short of being black, and was lusterless—with only a bit of scared pink in her cheeks, after that ride of the day before. He thought of her hands, too. They were the right hands for her, long, slender, and strong, he did not doubt, under a tricky look of being delicate. It was not possible that they could ever talk together again so easily. He could not make that seem true, but he could look at her. He had hoped she would promise to come again, but they had parted abruptly the afternoon before. Riding back with her, as they breasted the last slope leading to the ranch, he had rejoiced boldly at the chance that had led her up the lake trail that morning. Then Beulah Pierce had hailed them from his station at the bars, hailed them in a voice built to admirable carrying power by many cattle drives. His speech began, "Didn't I *tell* you where that upper trail would——" [33]

Whereupon the lady turned to dismiss her escort rather curtly.

"Thank you for riding back with me. I shall not trouble you any further." And he, staring suddenly at her with the wild deer's eyes again, had fled over the back trail.

He thought if there had been more time she might have said, "I will come again soon—perhaps to-morrow." He liked to think she might have said that, but he could not give it much reality.

He sprawled easily in the saddle, leaning his crossed arms on the pommel and gazing out over the sun-shot valley to the group of buildings and corrals at Bar-7. At least she rode somewhere every afternoon, and he would see her leave. If she turned down the valley road or up the cañon —well, that emergency could be met. He thought of speeches to make it plain that he had not followed her, daring to approach her in his mind, but knowing well that he would probably hide at sight of her.

A half hour he waited so, beholding visions of their accidental meeting. Then his pulses raced. He saw the stocky-barreled Cooney led from the corral to the front of the house by Red Phinney. He could almost discern the Sabbath finery of Red across that crystal mile—for this was the breathing day of the week, when faces were rasped cruelly by indifferent razors, and fine raiment was donned, black trousers and gay, clean shirts and neckerchiefs of flaming silk.

He could not see her mount. The ranch house hid that spectacle. But she rode into view presently, putting Cooney first to his little fox trot and then to a lope, as the road wound among the willows. [34]

He straightened in the saddle as she reached the creek. He was eager to retreat, yet feared to have his cowardice detected. And when Cooney halted midway of the stream, pawing its rocky bed and making a pretense of thirst, the woman looked up and saw her watcher on the trail. She

waved the gauntleted hand that held her quirt, and he found himself holding his hat in his hand with an affectation of ease. Then each laughed, and, though neither could hear the other, it was as if they had laughed together in some little flurry of understanding. He could still pretend to have happened there at that moment, he reflected. And this brought him courage as he saw her give Cooney his way where the trail branched. When the little horse had carried her to the summit and stood in panting gratitude, the waiting youth evolved a splendid plan for hiding his fright. He dismounted and forced himself to go coolly and take her hand. Perhaps it was as well that he had not trusted himself to remain in the saddle at that first moment. But when the thing was really over he no longer made a secret of his delight at her coming. His first anxious look at her face had shown him the cordial friendliness of the preceding day. She was amused by him, he could see that, and did not resent it; but she was kind, and in his joy at this he babbled, at first, with little coherence.

"I rode right over here to make sure I would see you," he began, "and then if you rode down the valley, or up, I was going to loaf along and find you by accident, and pretend I was hunting a colt. I was going to be afraid the mountain lions had got it." He laughed immoderately at this joke. "And while I waited for you I kept trying to think how fine it would have sounded last night if you had said, 'I think I shall go over and look at your place again to-morrow.' I couldn't make your voice sound true, though. It's a good thing we needn't try to paint voices." [35]

They were riding together over the first stretch of meadow. It seemed to have been agreed without words that they should ride to the lake cabin.

"To paint voices?" she queried.

"Voices, yes; how could yours be painted? It couldn't. You'll see that. I thought of a jumble of things—wine and velvet, for instance; some kind of rich, golden wine and purple velvet, and then, warm flickers of light in a darkened room, and a big bronze bell struck with something soft that would muffle it and yet make everything about it tremble. You see, don't you?" he concluded with a questioning look of deep seriousness.

His own voice was low and eager, with its undernote of wistfulness. Already he had renewed upon her that companionable charm which she had felt the day before, a charm compounded of half-shy directness, of flashes of self-forgetfulness, of quick-trusting comradeship. She rejected a cant phrase of humorous disclaimer that habit brought to her lips. It would puzzle or affront his forthrightness.

"Very well, we'll agree that my voice can't be painted," she said at last. "So let us talk of you."

"I guess I should like that pretty well," he answered after a moment's pondering. "I don't believe I've ever talked much; but now I feel as if I could tire you out, talking as we did yesterday. Queer, wasn't it?"

He fell silent, however, when the trail narrowed to climb the long ridge, as if the acknowledgment of his desire to speak had somehow quenched it. She fell in ahead, half turning in her saddle to address him from time to time, but he would talk only about things of the moment. In a marshy spot at the edge of the meadow he pointed out a bear wallow, and farther on a deer lick. "It's a sulphur spring," he exclaimed, "and deer come from miles around to drink there." [36]

"Do you shoot them?" she asked.

"We always have fresh meat when we need. Ben Crider says he won't let a deer come up and bite him without trying to defend himself."

"It's like murder, isn't it?"

"Well, I never murdered anyone myself, but I hit the first deer I ever shot at, and I felt as if I'd lain in wait at a street corner and killed a schoolboy on his way home. But I missed the next three or four, and that made me blood-thirsty. I guess if you carried that feeling back far enough a man could go out and shoot his little sister if he'd had to still-hunt her over rough ground all day, and especially if he'd missed two or three cousins or an uncle in the meantime. I think that would raise the savage in him enough."

They were skirting the lake now, a glinting oval of sapphire in its setting of granite. Beyond this they rode through the thinned timber—where Cooney was dissuaded, not without effort, from pursuing his ancient charge, and emerged into the glare of the clearing.

As they dismounted at the door of the cabin a melancholy of minor chords from a guitar came to their ears, and a voice, nasal, but vibrant with emotion, sang the final couplet of what had too plainly been a ballad of pathos: [37]

"While they were honeymooning in a mansion on the
hill,
Kind friends were laying Nellie out behind the mill."

"That's one of Ben's best songs," said Ewing, with so genuine a gravity that he stifled quite another emotion in the lady as she caught his look.

"Indeed! I must hear him sing more," she managed with some difficulty.

The sorrowful one arose as they entered, hastily thrusting aside his guitar as might an assassin have cast away his weapon. His face was shaven to a bitter degree; in spots it was scarified. But the drooping lines of woe unutterable were still there in opposition to his Sabbath finery—a spreading blue-satin cravat, lighted by a stone of impressive bulk, elegant black trousers, and suspenders of red silk embroidered with pansies and a running vine of green. He greeted the visitor as one who would say, "Yes, it's a sad affair—wholly unexpected," and, cocking an eye of long-suffering negation on Ewing, he went out to the horses.

As they entered the studio Mrs. Laithe saw that the easel had been wheeled into the light from the big window and that a woman's portrait had been placed upon it. Had Ewing looked at her on the instant he might have detected that her face seemed to ripple under some wind of emotion. But his own eyes had been on the portrait.

"That's my mother," he said, unconsciously hushing his voice.

"I should have known it," she answered, with a kind of spurious animation. "The face is so much like yours. It is a face one seems to have known before, one of those elusive resemblances that haunt the mind. It is well done." She ended the speech glibly enough.

"She was beautiful. My father did it. He had that trick of color, as you call it, or he could never [38] have painted her. She was so slight, but she had color. And she was quick and fiery. I used to see her rage when I was very small. I believed there were coals in her eyes, and that something blew on them inside to make them blaze. I wouldn't know what it was about, only that it wasn't us she raged at—not my father or me. I could go up and catch her hand even when she frightened me. And sometimes, after a while, my father would get excited, too. He was slower to take fire, but he burned longer. And at last she would become afraid and grow quiet herself and try to soothe him. I never could tell what they were at war with."

They looked in silence at the vivid young face on the canvas, a thin, daring, eager face, a face of delicate features, but strong in a perfect balance. The eyes were darkly alive.

"You were young when she died?" the woman asked at last.

"Too young to understand. I was eight, I think. There was a lot I shall never understand. Sometimes my father would tell me about their life here in the West, but never of the time before they came here. It always seemed to me that either he or she had quarreled with their people. They were poor when they came here. We lived in Leadville when I first remember. My mother sang in a church choir and made a little money and nights—you'll think this queer—my father played a piano in a dance hall. They had to live. Days, he painted. He had studied abroad in Paris and Munich, but he wasn't selling his pictures then. It took him years to do much of that. Sometimes they were hungry, though I didn't know it." He paused, overwhelmed by a sudden [39] realization that he was talking much.

"Tell me more," she said very quietly. "I wish to hear the rest."

"Well, at the last my mother was in bed a long time, and my father worked hard to get things for her, things she must have. But one night she died—it was a cold night in winter. He and I were alone with her. I'll not soon forget that. I sat up on the cot where I slept and saw my father sitting on the bed looking down at my mother. They were both still, and he wouldn't answer or turn his head when I spoke. Then I cried, for it was cold in the little cabin and my father's stillness scared me. But I don't think he heard me crying. He kept looking down at my mother's face, even when I called to him as loud as I could. Then I was afraid to see him that way any longer, so I pulled the blankets over my head and I must have cried myself to sleep.

"He was sitting the same way when I woke in the morning, still looking at my mother's face. Even when the people came to take her away he kept silent—and while they put her in the ground in a great, snowy field with little short waves all over it. And when we were back in the cabin not a word could I get from him, nor a look. He just sat on the bed again, looking at her pillow.

"In the evening some one brought a letter. I lighted a candle and took this letter to him, crowding it into his hand. I wanted him to notice me. I saw him study the envelope, then tear it open and look at a little slip of green paper that fell out. It was money, you understand, for pictures he had sent to New York. I knew this at once. I'd heard them talk of its coming and of [40] wonderful things they'd do with it when it did come. I was glad in an instant, for I thought that now we could get my mother back out of the ground. I was sure we could when he held the green slip close to the candle and began to laugh. It wasn't the way he usually laughed, it was louder and longer, but it was the first sound I'd heard from him, and it made me happy. I began to laugh myself as loud as I could, and danced before him, and his laugh went still higher at that. I ran for my jacket and mittens and cap. I wanted him to stop laughing and hurry along. I pulled his arm and he stopped laughing and looked down at me. I shouted 'Hurry—let's hurry and bring her back—let me carry the money!' He caught my shoulder and looked so astonished, then he burst into that loud laugh again, after he'd made me say it over. I ran for his overcoat, too, but when I came with it I saw he wasn't laughing at all. He was crying, and it was so much like his laugh that I hadn't noticed the change."

He had kept his eyes on the portrait while he spoke. He stopped abruptly now, turning to the listening woman, searching her face with new signs of confusion.

"I—I didn't know I was telling you all that."

She did not answer at once.

"And you came here after that?" she said at last.

"Yes; my father found this place. He wanted to be alone. I think he began to die when my mother went. He couldn't live without her. He taught me what he could, about books and pictures, but I couldn't have been much to him. I think it hurt him that I looked like her—he said I looked like her. He worked on that portrait to the very last, even on the morning of the day he died."

"What was your father's name?" [41]

"Gilbert Denham Ewing. I was named for him."

"And your mother's name before marriage was——"

"I'm ashamed that I never knew. It must have been spoken often, but I was so young; it never stayed in my mind. And a little while before he died my father burned all his letters and papers. I've wondered about their life long ago before I came, but I think my father meant me not to know. He had some reason."

"I am glad you have told me all you did know," she said.

"But you have made *me* glad," he assured her, returning to his livelier manner.

"Your mother's first name"—she asked—"what did your father call her?"

"Oh, that—Katharine. He called her Kitty."

"Kitty!" She repeated it after him, softly, as if she spoke it in compassion to the portrait.

"But see," he continued, "it's late. Stay and eat with us and I'll take you back by moonlight. I've ordered a fine, big, silver moon to be set up in the sky at seven, and Ben is already getting supper."

He pulled aside the blanket portiére, and through the doorway she could see the saturnine one —a man fashioned for tragedies, for deeds of desperate hazard—incongruously busied with a pan of soda biscuits and a hissing broiler.

When they rode back to Bar-7 the hills were struck to silver by the moon. They were companionably silent for most of the ride, though the youth from time to time, when the trail narrowed to put him in the rear, crooned stray bits of a song with which Ben Crider had favored [42] them while he prepared the evening meal. The lines Mrs Laithe remembered were:

> "Take back your gold, for gold it cannot buy me;
> Make me your wife, 'tis all I ask of you."

When they parted she said, "You must think about leaving here. It's time you rode out into the world. I think my brother will be back from his cattle-driving trip to-morrow, and I mean to bring him to see your pictures very soon. Perhaps he will suggest something for you."

"This moonlight does such wonderful things to your face," he remarked.

"Good night! I'm sorry you have so far to go."

"It isn't far enough," he answered, still searching her face. "Not half far enough—I have so much thinking—so much thinking to do."

CHAPTER V [43]

INTO THE PAST AND OUT

IT was not without concern that Mrs. Laithe awaited the return of her brother the following day. The cattle drive that had beguiled him from habits of extreme and enforced precision had occupied a fortnight, and she understood the life to be sorely trying to any but the rugged. Earnestly had she sought to dissuade him from the adventure, for insomnia had long beset him, and dyspepsia marked him for its plaything. Eloquently exposed to him had been the folly of hoping for sleep on stony ground after vainly wooing it in the softest of beds with an air pillow inflated to the nice degree of resiliency. And the unsuitability of camp fare to a man who had long been sustained by an invalid's diet had been shrewdly set forth. None the less he had persisted, caught in the frenzy of desperation that sometimes overwhelms even the practiced dyspeptic.

"It can't be worse, Sis," he had tragically assured her at parting. "If I've got to writhe out my days, why, I shall writhe like a gentleman, that's all. I can at least chuck those baby foods and perish with some dignity."

"But you're not leaving your medicines, those drops and things?" she had asked, in real alarm.

"Every infernal drop. I've struck all along the line—not another morsel of disinfected zwieback nor sanitary breakfast food nor hygienic prunes nor glutenized near-food—not even one pepsin [44] tablet. It's come to where I'd sooner have no stomach at all than be bullied night and day by one."

With which splendid defiance he had ridden desperately off, a steely flash in his tired gray eyes and a bit of fevered color glowing in his sallow cheeks.

When Mrs. Pierce loudly announced the return of the men early in the afternoon, therefore, the invalid's sister was ready to be harrowed. There would be bitter agonies to relate—chiefly stomachic. She had heroically resolved, moreover, not immediately to flaw the surface of her sympathy with any gusty "I told you so!" That was a privilege sacred unto her, and not to be foregone; but she would defer its satisfaction until the pangs of confession had been suffered; until the rash one should achieve a mood receptive to counsel.

At the call of Mrs. Pierce she ran down the flower-bordered walk to join that lady at the gate, and there they watched the cavalcade as it jolted down the lacets of the mesa trail—four horsemen in single file, two laden pack animals, another horseman in the rear. The returning invalid was equal, then, to sitting a horse. The far-focused eyes of Mrs. Pierce were the first to identify him. As the line advanced through the willow growth that fringed the creek she said, pointing, "There's Mr. Bartell—he's in the lead."

"But Clarence doesn't smoke; the doctors won't let him," his sister interposed, for she could distinguish a pipe in the mouth of the foremost horseman. "And, anyway, it couldn't be Clarence; it's too—" On the point of saying "too disreputable," she reflected that the person in front looked [45] quite like the run of Mrs. Pierce's nearest friends and might, indeed, be of her own household.

"It's sure your brother, though," insisted Mrs. Pierce, as the riders broke into a lope over the level, "and he *don't* look quite as—" Mrs. Pierce forbore tactfully in her turn. She had meant to say "dandified."

"And I tell you, Mis' Laithe, he does look husky, too. Not no ways so squammish as when he started. My suz! Here we've et dinner and they'll be hungry as bears. I must run in and set back something."

The other men turned with the packhorses off toward the corrals, but Bartell came on at a stiff gallop to where his sister waited. When he had pulled his horse up before her with perilous but showy abruptness, he raised himself in the saddle, swung his hat, and poured into the still air of the valley a long, high yell of such volume that his sister stepped hastily within the gate again. She had heard the like of that yell as they passed through Pagosa Springs, rendered by a cowboy in the acute stage of alcoholic dementia.

"Why, Clarence, *dear*!" she gasped, fearing the worst. But he hurriedly dismounted and came, steadily enough, to kiss her. She submitted doubtfully to this, and immediately held him off for inspection. He was frankly disreputable. The flannel shirt and corduroy trousers were torn, bedraggled, gray with the dust of the trail; his boots were past redemption, his hat a reproach; his face a bronzed and hairy caricature; and he reeked of the most malignant tobacco Mrs. Laithe had ever encountered. Only the gold-rimmed spectacles, the nearsighted, peering gray eyes, and a narrow zone of white forehead under his hat brim served to recall the somewhat fastidious, [46] sedate, and rather oldish-looking young man who had parted from her.

He smiled at her with a complacency that made it almost a smirk. Then he boisterously kissed her again before she could evade him, and uttered once more that yell of lawless abandon.

"Clarence!" she expostulated, but he waved her to silence with an imperious hand.

"Quickest way to tell the story, Nell—that's my pæan of victory. Sleep? Slept like a night watchman. Eat? I debauched myself with the rowdiest sort of food every chance I got—fried bacon, boiled beans, baking-powder biscuit, black coffee that would bite your finger off—couldn't get enough; smoked when I wasn't eating or sleeping; drank raw whisky, too—whisky that would etch copper. Work? I worked harder than a Coney Island piano player, fell over asleep at night and got up asleep in the morning—when they kicked me the third time. And I galloped up and down cliffs after runaway steers where I wouldn't have crawled on my hands and knees two weeks before. And now that whole bunch of boys treat me like one of themselves. I found out they called me 'Willie Four-eyes' when I first came here. Now they call me 'Doc,' as friendly as you can imagine, and Buck Devlin told me last night I could ride a streak of lightning with the back cinch busted, if I tried."

He broke off to light the evil pipe ostentatiously, while she watched him, open eyed, not yet equal to speech.

"Now run in like a good girl and see if Ma Pierce has plenty of fragments from the noonday feast. Anything at all—I could eat a deer hide with the hair on."

Wavering incredulously, she left to do his bidding. As he led his horse around to the corral he [47]

roared a snatch from Buck Devlin's favorite ballad, with an excellent imitation of the cowboy manner:

"Oh, bur-ree me *not* on the lone prai-*ree-e*—"

After he had eaten he slouched into a hammock on the veranda with extravagant groans of repletion, and again lighted his pipe. His sister promptly removed her chair beyond the line of its baleful emanations.

"Well, Sis," he began, "that trip sure did for me good and plenty. Me for the high country uninterrupted hereafter!"

She regarded him with an amused smile.

"I'm so glad, dear, about the health. It's a miracle, but don't overdo it, don't attempt everything at once. And the trip 'sure' seems to have 'done' you in another way—how is it—'good and plenty'? You walk like a cowboy and talk and sing and act generally like one——"

"Do I, really, though?" A sort of half-shamed pleasure glowed in his eyes. "Well, you know they're good, companionable fellows, and a man takes on their ways of speech unconsciously. But I didn't think it would be noticed in me so soon. Do I seem like the real thing, honestly, now?"

She reassured him, laughing frankly.

"Well, you needn't laugh. It's all fixed—I'm going to be one."

"But, Clarence, not for long, surely!"

"It's all settled, I tell you. I've bought a ranch, old Swede Peterson's place over on Pine River; corking spot, three half sections under fence and ditch, right at the mouth of a box cañon where [48] nobody can get in above me, plenty of water, plenty of free range close at hand."

"Clarence Bartell, you're—what do you call it?—stringing."

"Not a bit of it. Wait till I come on in about two years, after selling a train load of fat steers at Omaha or Kansas City—sashaying down Fifth Avenue and rounding into Ninth Street with my big hat and long-shanked spurs and a couple of forty-fours booming into the air. *You'll* see, and won't dad say it's deuced unpleasant!"

"But I'll not believe until I see."

He spoke ruminantly between pulls at the pipe.

"Lots of things to do now, though. Got to go down to Pagosa this week to pay over the money, get the deed, and register my brand. How does 'Bar-B' strike you? Rather neat, yes? It'll make a tasty little monogram on the three hundred critters I start with. I'm on track of a herd of shorthorns already."

"And a little while ago you were off to the Philippines, and before that to Porto Rico, and last summer you were going on one of those expeditions that come back and tell why they didn't reach the North Pole, and you came out here to be a miner and you've——"

There was an impatient, silencing wave of the pipe.

"Oh, let all that go, can't you?—let the dead past bury its dead. I'm fixed for life. You and dad won't laugh at me any more. Come on out now and see me throw a rope, if you don't believe me. I've been practicing every day. And say, you didn't happen to notice the diamond hitch on that forward pack horse, did you? Well, I'm the boy that did most of that."

She followed him dutifully to the corrals and for half an hour watched him hurl thirty feet of [49] rope at the horned skull of a steer nailed to the top of a post. When the noose settled over this mark his boyish delight was supreme. When it flew wide, which was oftener, his look was one of invincible determination.

As his sister left him he was explaining to Red Phinney, who had sauntered up to be a help in the practice, that the range of Bar-B had a lucky lie—no "greaser" could come along and "sleep" him.

She went back to her chair and book, shaping certain questions she would put to this brother. But it was not until after the evening meal that she could again talk with him, for the ardent novice found occupation about the stable and corrals the rest of the afternoon, and even sat for a time with the men in the evening, listening avidly to their small talk of the range, watchful to share in it. When he dared ask a question knowingly, or venture a swift comment couched in the vernacular, he thrilled with a joy not less poignant because it must be dissembled.

But conscience pricked him at length to leave those fascinating adventurers in the bunkhouse and to condescend for an interval to mere brotherhood. He found his sister alone in the "front" room, ensconced on the bearskin rug before a snapping and fragrant fire of cedar wood.

He drew up the wooden rocker and remarked that the fire smelled like a thousand burning leadpencils. He would have gone on to talk of his great experience, but the woman wisely forestalled him.

"Clarence," she began directly, "I've been thinking over that old affair of Randall Teevan and his wife, Kitty Lowndes, you know. Do you happen to recall the name of the man—the man Kitty went away with?" [50]

"Lord, no! That was before I'd learned to remember anything. If you want to rake that affair up, ask Randy Teevan himself. I'll wager he hasn't forgotten the chap's name. But why desecrate the grave of so antique a scandal? Ask me about something later. I remember he had a cook once, when I was six——"

"Because—because I was thinking, just thinking. Are you certain you remember nothing about it, not even the man's name, nor what sort of man he was, nor what he did, nor anything?"

"I only know what you must know. Randall Teevan's wife decided that the Bishop had made two into the wrong one. I doubt if I ever heard the chap's name. I seem to remember that they took Alden with them—he was a baby of four or five, I believe, and that Randy scurried about and got him back after no end of fuss. I've heard dad speak of that."

"Did Kitty and that man ever marry?"

"No; you can be sure Teevan saw to that. He took precious good care not to divorce her. They manage those things more politely nowadays; everything formal, six months' lease of a furnished house in Sioux Falls, with the chap living at a hotel and dropping in for tea every day at five; and felicitations from the late husband when the decree is granted in the morning and the new knot tied in the afternoon—another slipknot like the first, so that the merest twitch at a loose end will ——"

"Please don't! And did you never know anything more about them, where they lived or how they ended?"

"Never a thing, Sis. It's all so old, everybody's forgotten it, except Teevan. Of course he'd not forget the only woman who ever really put a lance through his shirt-of-mail vanity." [51]

"You forget Kitty's mother. She remembers."

"That's so, by Jove. Teevan got what was coming to him, he got his 'cone-uppance' as the boys say; but old Kitty—yes, it was rough on her. But she's always put a great face on it. No one would know if they *didn't* know."

"She's proud. Even though she's been another mother to me she rarely lets me see anything, and she's tried so hard to find comfort in Kitty's boy, in Alden. She's failed in that, though, for some reason."

Her brother glanced sharply at her. "I'll tell you why she's failed, Nell. Alden Teevan wasn't designed to be a comfort to anyone, not even to himself. There was too much Teevan in him at the start, and too much Teevan went into his raising."

"They're back in town, you know."

"Yes; Teevan must have realized that old Kitty is getting on in years, and has a bit of money for Alden. Say, Sis, I hate to seem prying, but you don't—you're not thinking about Alden Teevan seriously, are you? Come, let's be confidential for twenty seconds."

She mused a moment, then faced him frankly.

"There's something I like in Alden, and something I don't. I know what I like and I don't know what I don't like—I only feel it. There!"

He reached over to take one of her hands.

"Well, Sis, you trust to the feeling. You couldn't be happy there. And you deserve something fine, poor child! You deserve to be happy again." His inner eye looked back six years to see the body of poor Dick Laithe carried into the Adirondack camp by two silent guides who had found him where a stray bullet left him. [52]

She turned a tired, smiling face into the light.

"I *was* happy, so happy; yet I wonder if you can understand how vague it seems now. It was so brief and ended so terribly. I think the shock of it made me another woman. Dick and I seem like a boy and girl I once knew who laughed and played childish games and never became real. I find myself sympathizing with them sometimes, as I would with two dear young things in a story that ended sadly."

He awkwardly stroked and patted the hand he still held.

"Come and live with me, Nell. There's only a one-room cabin at that place now, with a carpet of hay on the dirt floor. But I'll have a mansion there next summer that will put the eye out of this shack at Bar-7. I believe in getting back to Nature, but I don't want to land clear the other side of her. You'd be comfy with me. And it's a great life; not a line of dyspepsia in it. And think of *feeling* yourself sliding off to sleep the moment you touch the pillow, as plainly as you feel yourself going down in an elevator. That reminds me, I'm going to bed down with the boys in the bunkhouse to-night. I'm afraid to trust myself in that bed upstairs again—I've lain awake there so many nights."

For a time she lost the thread of his rambling talk, busied with her own thoughts. She was

faintly aware that for luncheon he had been eating a biscuit, a thick, soggy, dangerous biscuit, caught up in the hurry of the morning's packing, wrenched in half and sopped in bacon grease. There was a word about shooting. He was learning to "hold down" the Colt's 44, and had almost hit a coyote. Later, words reached her of a cold night on the divide, when ice formed in the pail by the cooking fire. What at last brought her back was a yawn and his remark that he must "hole up" for the night. [53]

"Clarence," she began, looking far into a little white-hot chamber between two half-burned logs, "listen, please, and advise me. If you were going to do something that might, just possibly, and not by any means certainly, rake up rather an ugly mess, in a sort of remote way—that might make some people uncomfortable, you understand—I mean if you saw something that ought to be done, because the person deserved it, and it was by no means that person's fault, not in the least, and the person didn't even know about it nor suspect anything, would you stop because it might be painful to some one else—just possibly it might—or to a number of people, or even to the person himself, after he knew it? Or would you go ahead and trust to luck, especially when there's a chance that it mightn't ever come out?—though I'm quite sure it's true, you see, and that's what makes it so hard to know what to do."

She looked up at him with bright expectancy. Clutching his head with both hands, he stared at her, alarm leaping in his eyes.

"Would you mind repeating that slowly?" he began, in hushed, stricken tones. "No, no—I shouldn't ask that. One moment, please—now it all comes back to me. I see in fancy the dear old home, and hear faithful Rover barking his glad welcome. Ah, now I have the answer; I knew it would come. It's because one is a toiler of the sea and the other is a soiler of the tea—then the ball is snapped back for a run around the end and the man on third must return to his base." [54]

"I might have known you couldn't understand," she said regretfully; "but I can't possibly be more explicit. I thought if I stated the case clearly in the abstract—but I dare say it's a waste of time to ask advice in such matters."

"You've wasted yours, my child, if that's the last chance I get. Do you really want help about something?"

"No, dear, it wasn't anything. Never mind."

"All right, if you say so. And now, me for the blankets!"

When he had gone she stepped out into the night under the close, big stars. She breathed deeply of the thin, sharp air and looked over at the luminous pearl of a moon that seemed to hang above the cabin where Ewing's kid would doubtless be dreaming. Her lips fell into a little smile, half cynical, half tender.

"I'll do it anyway!" The inflection was defiant, but the words were scarcely more than a whisper. She said them again, giving them tone.

CHAPTER VI [55]

THE LADY AND THE PLAN

THEY were chatting the next morning over the late breakfast of Mrs. Laithe. Her brother, summoned from the branding pen, where tender and terrified calves were being marked for life, had come reluctantly, ill disposed to forego the vivacity of that scene. He had rushed in with the look of a man harassed by large affairs. His evil beard was still unshorn, his dress as untidy as care could make it. He drew a chair up to the oilcloth covered table and surveyed the meager fare of his sister with high disapproval.

"What you need is food, Nell," he began abruptly. "Look at me. This morning I ate two pounds of oatmeal, three wide slices of ham, five chunks of hot bread, about two thousand beans, and drank all the coffee I could get—and never foundered. How's that, against one silly glass of malted milk two weeks ago? And I slept till seven. I woke up for just eight seconds at four-thirty to hear the boys turning out. Oh, it was gray and cold in that bunkhouse—with me warm in the blankets. That was the one moment of real luxury I've ever known—not to turn out if I didn't choose. And I did *not* choose—if anyone should ride up hastily and inquire of you. When we were on the drive I had to turn out with the rest of the bunch and catch horses and unbuckle frosty hobbles with stiff fingers, and fetch pails of ice water and freeze and do other things, but this morning I just grinned myself asleep again. That was worth living for, my girl." [56]

But his sister was for once unresponsive. She had not seemed to hear him.

"Clarence," she began, as if reciting lines she had learned, "there's a chap over on the next ranch—Ewing's his name—that ought to have something done for him. He's young, twenty-four, I

believe, and boyish even for that age, but he draws; draws well. His father was a painter who died here years ago, and the boy has lived in these mountains ever since. His father taught him to draw, but he has had no chance to study, and he's reached a point where he must learn more or lose all he has. I'm almost certain he can make something of himself. He ought to go to New York, where he can study and see pictures and find out things. Now, please advise me about it."

"How's his health—his stomach?"

"I believe we've never spoken of it. That's hardly the point."

"Well, I call it a big point. Suppose he went off to New York and got plumb ruined, the way I did —no eats, no sleeps. If you want my advice, he ought to stay right here where everybody's healthy. He shouldn't be foolish."

"Clarence!" Her eyes shone with impatience. "It isn't whether he's to go or not. He's *going*, and he's to have money to keep him there till he makes himself known. It's on that point I need advice."

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I didn't savvy at first. You're to tell me what to advise and I'm to advise it? Well, tell me what to say."

"Don't be stupid, dear—just for a moment, please. You're bound to agree with me when you see [57] his work. And you might offer to lend him the money—my money, though he's not to know that. Or perhaps you ought to buy his pictures. I'm sure you'll want some of those things he has. Of course that's the better way. It will let him feel independent. There, it's fixed. It was simple, after all." She flashed him a look of gratitude. "You're a help after all, dear, when you choose to be."

"But—one moment, my babe! Perhaps after listening to my advice so meekly you'll let the poor chap say a word for himself. Perhaps he'd rather stay right here in God's own country if he eats and sleeps well now."

"Please, please, let's not be so—so foody! Of course he wants to go!"

"But what in Heaven's name would you ever have done without my help, poor mindless child that you are?"

But she was oblivious to this subtlety.

"Yes, dear, you're always a comfort. We'll ride over this afternoon and tell him he's to go. It will be a fine thing to do—he's so promising."

"Look here, Nell"—he glanced at her shrewdly—"is this to be his picnic or yours?"

She burned with a little inner rage to feel her cheeks redden, but the black fringe of her eyes did not fall before him.

"We'll ride over after luncheon," she repeated, "and I do wish, Clarence, that you'd shave and wear a collar or a stock, and throw that unspeakable coat away, and have your boots cleaned, and send for some cigars."

He looked complacently down over the objectionable attire, pulled sputteringly at the condemned pipe, then grinned at her.

"Say, Sis, if it's going to be *that* much fun for you, I'll rope and throw him, and send him on tied [58] if he acts rough."

Late that evening the two inmates of the lake cabin sat before the big fireplace in the studio to talk of a wondrous thing. They had survived the most exciting half day in the life of either, and the atmosphere of the room was still electrical with echoes of the big event. Through their supper Ewing, unable to eat, had sat staring afar, helpless in the rush of the current, inert as a bowlder in the bed of a mountain stream. He, so long at rest, was to be swept down from the peace of his hill nook to the ocean, to life itself. It was a thing to leave one aghast with a consternation that was somehow joyous. Since supper he had stared into the fire in dumb surrender to the flood, with intervals of dazed floor-pacing, in which he tried to foresee his course.

Ben Crider, submerged by the waters of the same cloudburst, was giving stouter battle to the current. His face drawn to more than its wonted dejection, he strove to play the beacon. Between snatches of worldly counsel he read with solemn inflection certain gems of guidance from authors in whose wisdom he had long felt a faith entire. His ready mind harked forward to direful emergencies, and he submitted devices for meeting these.

"Remember what that says, Kid," he urged impressively, and he read once more a saving passage from his well-thumbed "Guide to Polite Behavior." "'If you cannot sing a song or tell a mirth-provoking story at an evening ball or party you may well perform a few tricks in legerdemain. The following are among the simplest and, when deftly performed never fail to [59] provoke loud applause and win you the undying gratitude of your hostess.' Are you a-hearin' me? Well, I've turned down the pages at that one with the coin and the hat, and the one where you must tell the right card by a simple act of mind-readin'. And don't forget what he says here, 'the hand is quicker'n the eye.'"

"Yes, Ben; I'm listening."

"Well, listen to this here other book. It's more serious."

He took up his treasured "Traps and Pitfalls of a Great City," and again became a voice in the wilderness, waving a forefinger to punctuate and warn.

"'It is the habit of these gentry to lie in wait for their intended victims when they alight at the principal railway stations, and where, by their plausible and insinuating advances, they ingratiate themselves into the *confidence* of those whom it is their purpose to fleece; hence the name, "confidence men." Only by constant watchfulness and a thorough knowledge of their methods may the stranger in the great city hope to escape their wiles, since their ways of approach are manifold.' You hear that, Kid—their ways is manifold. Here's a pitcher of one of 'em tacklin' a countryman. See what an oily-lookin' feller he is, stovepipe hat, fancy vest, big watchchain, long coat, striped pants. You'd say he was a bank president. Oh, I bet they're slick ones. They'd have to be to tog out like that every day in the week. Now remember, if one o' them ducks comes up to you and starts to butter you up with fine words and wants to carry your satchel, you just let out a yell for the police and hand him over. That's the way to settle 'em!"

"I'll surely remember, Ben."

"And there's thugs and footpads. Always keep your coat buttoned over your watch, it says, and [60]
if you're goin' along Broadway or Fifth Avenue after dark, get out and walk in the middle o' the street, so's they can't spring around a corner and slug you. And don't talk to strangers, and don't look into store windows ner up at the high buildin's, else they'll spot you fer a greeny and give you the laugh."

"I can't believe it yet, Ben." He rose to walk the floor again, his hands sunk deep in his pockets, his head bent low.

"And don't git into no card game on the train with a couple o' smooth strangers that ain't ever met each other before and want to pass away the time pleasantly. And don't bet you can open the patent lock after you think you found the secret spring. And don't buy any o' that money you can't tell from real, that was printed from stolen Gov'ment plates."

"Think of his giving a hundred dollars for that drawing of 'Lon Pierce on the pinto, throwing a steer, and all that money for the others."

"Serves him right!" Ben hissed this vindictively, having first reluctantly laid aside "Traps and Pitfalls." "Serves him dead right! That feller puts on a wise look that's about sixty-five years beyond his real age, as I'd cal'late it. I tell you, son, it sure takes all kinds o' fools to make a world."

"But he said they were worth the money," Ewing pleaded. "He said I would do even better, some day."

"Sure—*sure* he said it! An' didn't he ask me if I had dyspepsia, an' did I sleep at night, an' I'd
better remember to live an outdoor life of activity if I ever got that a-way. An' he thinks he's [61]
learned how to grain a deer hide after watching me do it three minutes, an' he's goin' to pick up a live skunk next chanct he gits, because I told him jest how to grab it. Oh, he *said* things all right! He said a variety o' things!" He glared at Ewing as he rounded out this catalogue of follies.

"I'm torn in two, Ben. I shan't be glad to leave here, and yet I'll be glad to go. I've dreamed it so long. It seems as if I'd dreamed it so hard I'd made it come true."

"Always pin your money to the inside of your vest, like I told you," came the voice of warning.

"I will, I will. But things *do* happen, don't they? This is like a fairy tale."

"Fairy tale!" The wise one uttered this with violent scorn. "Likely you was the sleepin' beauty, an' this here princess comes along with an alarm clock!"

"Not a princess, Ben." He laughed boyishly. "She's a sure-enough queen."

"Jest remember they's knaves in the deck. That's all *I* ask."

"You like her don't you?"

Ben made an effort to be fair.

"Well, I do an' then I don't. She's saddle stock, fur looks, that lady is, but she ain't serious. No, sir! When her eyes is on me I know as well's I want to she's snickerin' inside; makes no difference if her face does look like it was starched. You'll find, when all's said an' done, that she's plumb levitous, an' levitous folks is triflin'."

"Have you seen how sorrowful she looks sometimes, a sort of glad-sorry, as if she felt sorry for
herself and glad for other people? She makes me feel old when she looks that way—as if I must [62]
protect her."

"Yes, an' other times she's stiffer'n Lot's wife!"

"Other times she seems older than all the world, a woman who has always lived and always will."

"Well, son, when you git put afoot there, you write on an' I'll manage to scare up a git-away

stake fur you."

"It's wonderful to think of going out into the world that *they* knew, Ben—my father and mother. It seems as if they must be out there now, and that I'm going to meet them very quietly and naturally some day. I think it wouldn't astonish me."

"Look a-here, Kid! That'll be about enough o' *that*! You go to bed."

The other smiled a little wanly.

"I can't. I'm afraid to. I'm going to sit here awhile and think, and when the moon gets up I'm going outside to think. The hills haven't heard the news yet, and the trail over to the lake doesn't know about it. I've got to spread it before I sleep. You see, when I do sleep, I'm afraid I'll wake up and find it was stuff I dreamed."

"Shucks, Kid, what's the use o' talking like that? It ain't no dream. It's true as God made little apples." There was, at the moment, a noticeable relaxation from the speaker's habitual austerity. An awkward smile of affection melted the hardness of his face as he held out a hand to Ewing. "An' I'm doggoned if I'd be so *all-fired* amazed if everything come out fur the best. Yes, sir, blame me, Kid, if I don't almost half b'lieve you'll make good!"

"You can bet I'll try, Ben!"

"That's right; you do your damndest—'angels can do no more,' as the feller said." [63]

As he lighted a candle his face was grim once more—savagely grim, even as he sang, in going to his rest:

"Oh, 'twas on a summer's eve when I first *metter*,
Swingin' on the garden ga-a-ate!"

CHAPTER VII [64]

TWO SLEEPERS AWAKEN

It now befell that the imminent adventure of Ewing should bring him a double rapture. The day after Mrs. Laithe secretly played special Providence to that unsuspicious youth her brother found profit of his own in the plan.

"I've a world of things to do here, Nell," he said. "I ought to stay here this winter. I'd be that much forwarder with my work next spring."

"I shall be quite safe alone," she answered.

"Why go alone? If you insist on robbing the cradle, why not take the innocent with you? Of course you'll have to see that he doesn't walk off the train, or lose his hat out of the window, or eat too much candy, or rough-house the other children on the way, but he'll serve every purpose of a man and brother."

"To be sure!" she broke in with enthusiasm. "I worried last night about his going. We'll put it that I'm in his charge, and he will really be in mine."

"That's it. He'll feel important, and you'll be the tidy nurse. And with both of you off my mind I can start those chaps to getting out logs for the Bar-B mansion. I'll camp over there till a good tracking snow comes, then I'll have an elk hunt—I want a good head for the dining room—then I'll hole up here at Pierce's for the winter and learn how to handle my stock. So that's settled."

Mrs. Laithe rode over to apprise Ewing of this plan. The little clearing slept vacant in the sunlight. She left Cooney "tied to the ground" by throwing the bridle rein over his head, and knocked on the open door of the cabin with the handle of her quirt. There was no response save echoes from the empty living room. Crossing this she drew aside the blanket that curtained the door of the studio. The big room lay before her in strange disorder. Pictures and hangings were gone from the wall. Two yawning trunks stood by the door; canvases and portfolios lay about; loose drawings and clothing littered the chairs and floor. Beyond this disarray stood the easel, still holding the mother's portrait. In the light from the window the eyes looked livingly into her own through the silence. She was struck by some new glint of meaning in them, something she read as an appeal, almost a prayer. Her own eyes fell and then she first noticed the room's living occupant. [65]

On the couch, in the shadow of the half-drawn curtain, Ewing lay asleep. He had sprawled there easily, half turned on his side, one arm flung about his head, the other hanging over to the floor. Now that she saw him she heard his measured breathing. Some new, quick-born interest—curiosity, sympathy, she knew not what—impelled her to scan the sleeping face more closely. She

stepped lightly across to the couch and looked down at him, with a little air of carelessness against his sudden awakening. It was the first time she had studied his face in repose. Lacking the ready, boyish smile, it was an older face, revealing lines of maturity she had not suspected in the arch of brow above the deep-set eyes, in the lean jaws and sharply square chin, and in the [66] muscled neck, revealed by the thrown-back head. It was a new face, for the unguarded faces of the sleeping, like the faces of the dead tell many secrets. Ewing's face was all at once full of new suggestion, of new depths, of unsuspected complexities. As she gazed, scarce breathing, she was alive to a new consciousness of him. He had been a boy, winning from her at once by his fresh, elemental humanness a regard that came partly from the mother lying alert in her, and partly from the joyous, willing and even wistful comrade which this woman was fitted to be. Now, bending over the unmasked face, she divined with swift alarm that her old careless attitude toward the sleeper might never be recovered. What her new attitude must be she could not yet know, but she was conscious of being swept by a great wave of tenderness for him; swept, too, by fear of him; and the impact of these waves left her trembling before him. Some flash of portent, some premonition born of instinct, warned her with a clearness that was blinding. Tenderness and fear rolled in upon her, though her reason weighed them as equal absurdities. Then her look rose to the mother's portrait and she saw that the eyes had followed her: they seemed now to challenge, almost fiercely. Only the briefest of moments could she endure their gaze, a gaze that in some way drew life to itself from the breathing of the sleeper. Instinctively she brushed her hand before her own eyes, drew herself up with a little flinching shudder and moved slowly backward to the door.

Then she was happily out in the sunlight, breathing deep of the pine-spiced air, gratefully eying the familiar boundaries of the clearing, the stumps, the huge pile of cut wood, and the fenced-in vegetable garden. Over the line of green to the north a gray, bare mountain shot above the lesser [67] hills, rising splendidly from its timbered base to a peak hooded in snow. It swam in her vision at first, but presently something of its grounded sureness, something of the peace that slept along its upper reaches, fell upon her own soul and her serenity was restored.

Not pausing to review those amazing moments of inner tumult, she stepped again to the door and with her old, careless, mildly amused laugh she beat upon it, loudly this time. She heard an inarticulate call from the studio, and again she assaulted the panel. Then the curtain was drawn aside and Ewing stared at her from the doorway.

"I believe you were sleeping," she started to say, but he came quickly to her with something between a laugh and a shout.

"Then it's true, it *is* true—you're real! I just dreamed that you became Ben Crider and made me walk in the middle of the street." He fairly rushed her into the studio and waved excitedly to the open trunks.

"There! I began to pack last night so I could see it when I woke up and have a proof that things were true. I didn't sleep at all till about eight this morning."

She sat on the couch, feeling that she was foolish beyond measure to avoid the eyes of the portrait. Then she smiled at him with an effort to recover the amused ascendancy of their first meetings.

"It's all true, I assure you, and I wonder if you'd mind taking charge of me when you go East. My brother has suggested it, and I'll promise not to be a trouble."

His look of wondering delight was so utterly boyish, his helpless laughter so entirely without reserve that she regained for the moment her old easy dominance.

"Would I mind—mind going with you? That's a joke, isn't it?" He seized both her hands in a [68] grasp from which she caught some thrill of his deep-breathed, electric joy.

"But of course this is nonsense," he went on; "I'm still lying there."

"Enough of dreams," she broke in warningly. "You'll find it only too, too real. You're going to work. It's simple."

He sat down on one of the trunks, trying to subdue his excitement, his hands clenched.

"If this feeling lasts I can do anything, *anything*, you understand, learn everything, do everything, be everything. I have power. Ever since you left yesterday I've felt full of steel springs, all tightly coiled. Only I must be careful. If they went off all at once there'd be an explosion, and I'm afraid I couldn't ever be repaired."

She grimaced with an effort at mock dismay which was not wholly successful. She divined the literal truth under his jesting. The springs were coiled and their steel was not too well tempered, she believed. The thought left a shadow on her face.

"You're not doubting anything?" he asked quickly.

"Not doubting, O youth! Only a little innocent wonder."

"But isn't life an enchantment? Isn't it all miracles? Oh, I understand poets at last. They can't tell you their secret unless you already know it. They sing in big numbers. They say a million is true, and you say, 'Yes, that's very pretty, but it's poetry—exaggeration; he really means that a hundred is true,' and you never know any better till the light comes. Then you see that the poet [69]

was literal and quite prosaic all the time. The whole million was always true, in beauty and bigness and wonder."

"Stop!" she protested. "You're making me feel as old as the world itself, ancient and scarred with wisdom."

"You!" he burst in, "you're as young as the world. You are foolish and I am the wise one if you can't see that. Indeed, you're looking beautifully foolish this minute. You are thinking all kinds of doubts underneath a lot of things you won't tell me. You're secretive. You hide a lot from me."

She laughed, a little uneasily.

"You are a babe for wisdom," she retorted; "but you're not to be enlightened in a day—nor by me. I'll give you a year. You shall tell me then which of us two is the older. Now you must be at your packing. Can you be ready by Monday?"

"Monday? and I'd been wondering what would be the name of the day. So it's merely Monday? How many Mondays there have been, how many, many Mondays, that were like any other day! And now this Monday steals up—yes, I'll be ready."

"I see you are past reason——"

"Say above it——"

"Anyway, get on with your packing. So much is true." He would have ridden back with her, but she demurred.

"It's so far," he urged.

"It isn't half far enough," she mocked him, "I have so much thinking to do!"

"Monday, Monday, Monday, then!" he chanted, as he went out to lift her into the saddle. But when he had done this he suddenly bowed his head to kiss her hand, as he had seen his father [70] long ago kiss his mother's hand.

"You are all the world, just now, all I know of it," he said.

She looked back to where he stood, straight and buoyant, his head thrown back in joyous challenge.

"And you are youth—dear, dear youth!" she cried; but this he could not hear.

A little farther on she breathed softly, "Poor dead Kitty—don't be afraid!"

CHAPTER VIII [71]

THE JOURNEY WONDER

DURING those last days Ewing brushed only the airy slopes of illusion, strive as he would to keep his feet to earth. Many were the tricks he used to this end: vain tricks to forget the miracle of his going, of going so soon, of going with her.

Ben Crider would not help him forget. When snatches of warning from "Traps and Pitfalls" grew stale, Ben coined advice of a large and general character.

"Want to be an artist, hey? Ask me? Go down to Durango—let that professor learn you in ten lessons. Make yer five t' eight dollars a day canvassin' fur enlargements. Gold frame throwed in. Yes, sir! Ask me? Durango's fur enough. New York's too gosha-mighty fur!"

It was not possible to forget under the droppings of this counsel. Wherefore his spirit tossed in tumult.

When Ben called him on the morning of the start it was still dark. He lay a moment, his nerves tightening. This was the last time he would lie in that bed—for how long? Well, on some unmarked night in the pregnant future, lying there again, he would look back to this moment and tell himself all the wonderful things that had come to him—tell his ignorant, puzzled, excited self, who would, somehow, be waiting and wondering there.

Juggling this conceit, he groped for matches and a candle. He could hear the singing of the [72] kettle in the outer room. Through the window he saw a lantern swinging, and knew that Ben would be bringing around the horses. It was a time to be cool, a time to gird himself.

He had breakfast on the table when Ben came in, and they ate by the light of a smoky lamp, tacitly pretending that no miracle was afoot. Saving the early hour, it was a scene they enacted whenever they drove to Pagosa for supplies, up to the point when, the meal finished, they carried

two trunks from the studio out to the wagon. But they managed this carelessly enough, with only a casual, indignant word or two about the excessive weight of full trunks.

Only the faintest hint of light showed in the east as the chilled horses stumbled awkwardly down the hill. A half hour they rode in a silence broken but once, and then only by Ben's hoarse threat to "learn" the off horse something needful but unspecified which it appeared not to know.

The light glowed from gray to rose and day was opened by the bark of a frantic squirrel that ran half-way down a tree trunk, threatening attack, in alarm for its store of spruce cones at the foot of the tree. A crested jay at the same moment mocked them harshly from a higher branch of the tree.

Ewing exhaled with gusto a breath of the warming, pine-spiced air.

"It's sunning up, Ben." Ben grunted unamiably.

A little distance ahead of them a doe and a half-grown fawn bounded across the road.

"She seemed to be in a hurry," Ewing again ventured.

"She wanted t' git that child away from here, 'fore some one stuffed its head full o' fool talk [73] about goin' off to New York. Can't tell what notions a young deer *might* git." With this laborious surmise he shut his jaws together with repellent grimness.

Their road now wound down a hill and out of the woods to join the valley road.

"Yender's Beulah Pierce!" Ben snapped this out savagely. The wagon was half a mile ahead. Pierce was driving, and in the rear seat were two figures whom they knew to be Mrs. Laithe and her brother. As Ben had pointedly ignored these Ewing did not refer to them.

They came to a gate in a wire fence that stretched interminably away on either side, over brown, low-rolling hills. Pierce had left the gate open for them, and Ewing got out to close it after they had passed through.

"Larabie is building a lot of fence," he said, as they drove on. "At this rate he'll have every school section in Hinsdale County wired in pretty soon."

On this impersonal ground Ben seemed willing to meet him.

"Me? Know what I'm going to do if Wes' Larabie cuts off any more o' this road with his barb wire? Stick a pair o' wire clippers in the whip socket an' drive through. *That's* all! You'd think he owned all America, the way he makes people sidle along that fence till he gits good an' ready to make a gate. Me? Make my own gates. Yes, sir! Wire clippers!"

With this he was sufficiently cheered to insult vivaciously a couple of dull, incurious Mexicans whom they presently passed, plodding behind a laden burro train. To his opprobrious burst of weirdly entangled Spanish and English he added the taunting bleat of a sheep and a merrily [74] malign gesture eloquent of throats to be slit—the throats of unspeakable sheep herders. He observed with deep disgust that neither of the threatened ones gave any sign of interest in their portended fate. They passed with scarce a lift of their heads.

"They're takin' supplies up to that sheep outfit o' Rankin's," grumbled Ben. "Pierce an' some o' the others is talkin' about gettin' in a car load o' saltpeter an' dopin' the range if Rankin lets his herd work down any closeter—have it billed in as hardware or pianos, an' unload the car at night. Serve him right fur bein' a sheep man. An' yet I knowed Nels Rankin, five, six years ago, when there wa'n't a more respectable cuss in the hull San Juan."

In passing the Pulcifer ranch they made talk about the hay-cutting, for a reaper sent its locustlike click from a brown stretch of bottom land. Pulcifer had a good stand of hay, they agreed, and probably he wouldn't have such a big winter kill this year if he didn't act the fool and sell off too much of it. You couldn't expect to bring cattle through fat on cottonwood browse.

So they lamely gossiped the miles away in strained avoidance of the big event. Only once did Ewing look back, while Ben was occupied with the horses at a ford. The rocky wall at the verge of their lake was intimately near, despite the miles they had come, and below it, through a notch in the hills, he could see a spot of yellow—the new shake roof on a shed they had built that summer near the cabin. Then his eyes were ahead to where Pierce's wagon crawled up a hill.

Ben whipped up the horses and burst into song: [75]

"One evening I was strolling through the city of the
dead;
I viewed where all around me their peaceful forms
were spread."

He took the thing at a quick, rollicking tempo, as one resolved to be gay under difficulties.

When they drew up to the station platform at Pagosa, Ewing hurried to greet Mrs. Laithe and her brother. Pierce busied himself with the trunks, cautiously watching the man check them.

Ben Crider, after a long, fervent look at Ewing's back, caught his breath, sniffled, strangled this, and stepped quickly into his wagon. Pulling the horses quietly away from the platform he

whipped them into a sharp trot toward the town. Ewing ran back, shouting. Ben would not turn, but he thrust one arm back and upward with a careless wave.

Ewing stared hard at the bent head, the eloquent back, longing for a further sign, but none came. He was at the gateway of the world, a mist before his eyes.

A moment later their little train rattled into a narrow cañon where its shrill whistle, battered from wall to wall, made the place alive with shrieking demons.

Having seen his charge to a seat in the one squalid car, Ewing went out to brace himself on the rear platform. She who was doing this thing had seemed a strange lady again; in her manner, as in her dress, more formal. The dark-blue, close-fitting gown, the small toque of blue velvet, the secretive veil, the newish gloves, instead of the old, worn riding gauntlets, the glossy-toed black boots so different from those of scarred tan he knew, all marked a change that heightened the pangs of homesickness he already suffered.

With burning eyes and tightened throat he saw the floor of the cañon rush away from him, and [76] watched old Baldy's snow hood flashing momentarily as the train twisted, now sinking below a quick-rushing wall of rock, now showing over a clump of cedars. It was as if the old peak had become sprightly at his going, and sought to bob curtsies to him.

At intervals the train came to a jangling halt. The little locomotive would leave it and ramble inconsequently off into the big pine woods, to return with screeches of triumph, dragging a car load of new-sawn boards from the mill. Or it would puff away to a siding and come back importantly with a car of excited sheep. At these halts Ewing would leap to the ground to feel the San Juan earth under his feet.

At the junction where they were to take the through train he reflected that nothing had really happened yet. He could turn back and be out of the dream. The little train would return up the cañon presently. The conductor would be indifferent to his presence. To the brakeman, whom he knew, he could say, "Yes, I thought some of going to New York this morning, but I changed my mind." He would be back at Pagosa by five and find Ben at the post office or the "Happy Days" saloon. Then there would be no more of that curious sickness—a kind of sickish wanting. Yet, when the through train drew in, he hurried aboard.

He stood on the rear platform and watched a horseman jogging over the sandy plain to the west, picturing his ride from the junction to some lonely ranch on a distant river bottom. He would have the week's mail in a bag back of the saddle, and a stock of tobacco. He would reach the place after dark, perhaps, from sheer *ennui*, shooting at a coyote or two along the way. He [77] knew that rider's life, the days of it and the nights, and all of good or ill that might ever betake him. It was well, he thought, to dare a bigger life, though he waved a friendly greeting to the unconscious horseman, jogging at the head of his train of dust. He flung a tender glance at the diminished junction, now a low, dull blur on the level horizon, and went into the car.

For the moment the Pullman had no other occupant but himself and Mrs. Laithe, and she was sleeping, he thought; but her eyes opened as he would have passed her seat. She had replaced the toque with a brown cap he knew, and as she smiled up at him she seemed again almost the familiar godmother of his fairy tale. He passed on, however, after a meaningless word or two and, sprawling in another section, surrendered himself to the troubled pretentiousness of the Pullman school of decoration.

He had left the lady grateful for his going. She was in no mood for that artless lyric chant of youth in which he was so adept. Her brother that morning had accused her of waning enthusiasm for her protégé.

"I believe you're funking, Nell," he had said shrewdly. "You're discovering that mountain slumming is different from the city kind."

But she had protested that no discerning person of ordinary humanity could have done less for the prisoned youth. "Of course"—and she had sighed—"he's a mere bundle of untried eagerness, and we're responsible, in a way, for Heaven knows what, but we had to do it, didn't we?"

"Not 'we' had to! *You* had to. It's all yours, Nell—the credit and the glory and all the rest. I prefer to get up my own responsibilities, if you don't mind."

"But you agreed with me—you *did*—you advised when I asked you—-it's perfectly plain—you [78] said, 'Of course!'"—But the train moved off in the midst of his laugh at this, and he had doffed his hat to her with a mocking gesture of freehanded relinquishment.

Now, as she closed her eyes again, her memory dived for some fairy tale or fragment of mythology in which an unsuspecting humanitarian rescued an insignificant woods thing, only to have it change on the instant into a creature troublesome in more ways than one. She was certain some primitive fabulist had foreseen this complication, but her mind was weary and shadowed, and the historic solution evaded her. "Mountain slumming" was truly more exigent than the town sort.

But this reflection aroused a defensive sympathy. The vision of Ewing as he had passed glowed before her shut eyes, the active, square-shouldered, slender figure, garbed in a decently fitting suit of gray (she was glad to remember that), the quick eyes, ardent for life, the thinned, brown face, the usual buoyance held down to an easy self-possession that was new to her, the wild,

reliant expectancy of a boy tempered all at once by some heritage of insight. Outwardly, at least, he would fit his new life. So reflecting, she dozed on the look of the man in his eyes, and dreamed that she feared this and fled. But after mad flight through the windings of an interminable corridor she awoke to look squarely into his eyes, to cower instinctively under his touch on her arm. Her waking thought took the thread of the dream, her flight had been vain: he was there, and his voice throbbed fatefully within a secret chamber of her mind, even though his words rang little of portent.

"We are coming to the supper station." [79]

She hastened to freshen herself with cold water, and they were presently eating a hasty meal at a crowded table. Then they were out side by side to pace the platform briskly.

There was green about the station, where water had taught the desert to relent, but beyond this oasis the sand sea stretched far and flat to murky foothills. Above these they could see a range of sharp-peaked mountains that still caught the sunlight, some crystal white with snow, others muffled by clouds turned to iris-hued scarfs of filmiest gauze.

"El Dorado is beyond those hills," said the youth fervently.

"It looks accessible from here," she answered, "but——"

"You're warning me again. You're afraid I'll be discouraged by the hills."

"Not discouraged, but there are resting places on the way. They hold the bulk of the pilgrims, I fear."

"I shall go on; not even you could stop me."

She caught a glint in his fierce young eyes that she thought he must be unconscious of.

"I? Oh, I shall spur you—if you need spurring."

"I know; I'm only beginning to realize how much I owe you; I mean to repay you, though."

There was an intimation of remoteness in his tone, as if he saw himself removed from her, mounting solitary to his dream city, a free-necked, well-weaponed pilgrim, sufficient unto himself. It was as if he had put distance between them the moment he crossed the threshold of the world. She drew a full breath. It came to her, as the upflashing of some submerged memory, [80] that all his frank adoration of her had been quite impersonal. He had regarded her as a bit of line and color. It was amazing to remember that he had made no effort to know her, save with his eyes. She divined that she had stopped short of being human to him, while he to her had been, more than anything else, a human creature of freshness and surprises. Whatever difficulties might be in the way of an easy friendliness between them, they would not be of his own making. She was sure she felt a great relief.

Ewing awoke in the night at some jolting halt of the train, to feel an exciting thrill of luxury as he stretched in his berth. Here was no stumbling about in the dark to search for a lost trail; nor must he rise in the chill dawn to worry a blaze from overnight embers, cook a discouraging breakfast, catch horses, and lade unwilling beasts with packs. Things would be done for him; and the trail was wide and level as befits the approach to the world. He dozed royally off feeling that he had bitten into the heart of his wonder at last.

The following day they sped through a land whose kind he knew, but after another night he awoke to find their train breasting the brown waves of a sea that rolled lazily to far horizons. No longer was there one of his beloved mountain peaks to be a landmark: only an endless, curving lowness, as of land that had once tried to lash itself into the fury of mountain and crag, and then ceased all effort—to lie forever impotent and sad.

He thought of Ben amid this disconsolate welter. Ben had beheld this sight years ago, and had described it with aversion, as one relating a topographical scandal. Ewing favored his companion with heartfelt dispraise of this landscape, applauding the suggestion of a woman she laughingly [81] quoted that "there should be a tuck taken in the continent." He was sure nothing would be lost by it.

The lady beguiled him over the inadequacies of Kansas by promising a better land farther on. He gladly turned from the car window to watch the pretty play of her mouth as she talked.

But the next day—they steamed out of St. Louis in the morning—he scanned several hundred square miles of excellent farming land with sheer dismay. From morning till night they ran through what, to Ewing, was a dead, depressing flatness, a vast and clumsy jest of a checkerboard, with cornfields for squares. The tiny groves of oak at long intervals seemed only to satirize the monotony. The rolling plains of the day before had been vivacious beside this flatness, and there had been a certain mournful dignity in their solitude. But this endless level lacked even solitude. To Ewing, indeed, the mystery of it lay in its well-peopled towns. He wondered how men kept sane there. Mrs. Laithe insisted that it was an important stretch of our country, that it fed thousands and made useful objects in its tall-chimneyed factories (things like wagons and watches and boots, she believed), and that it ought not to be discountenanced. But he could feel nothing for it, save an unconfessed pity that it would sleep that night in ignorance of his glorious transit. He had never suspected there could be so many thousands of people who took the world as a tame affair and slept indifferent to young men with great things before them.

"If New York is like this," he said, with a flash of his old boyish excitement, "what can I ever do without you?" [82]

"But it isn't at all like this, and you'll do big things without me—or with me, if I can help you."

"You will have to help me. Now that I've seen the beginning of the world, I'm depending on you more than I thought I should when we started."

"You will lose that."

"Will I? But it will be queer to see you as part of the world—no longer the whole of it; to see how you stand out from the others. Perhaps the rest of the world will be only a dingy background for you—you are all color and life."

"You've made me feel like a lay figure," she laughed. Then, in a flash of womanish curiosity, she ventured, "Have you ever thought me anything but a shell of color?"

He stammered, blushing painfully.

"Oh, a real person—of course, certainly! A woman, yes—but when I think of you as a woman, I'm scared, like those first times I saw you. I can't help it. You may not believe it," he concluded with a burst of candor, "but the truth is, I don't know women."

He was again embarrassed when she retorted, with her laugh:

"O youth! May you always know so much!"

"Well, to-morrow afternoon we shall be in New York," he said briskly, when she had shut the deeps of her eyes from him. He had felt the need to show that there were matters upon which he could speak with understanding.

CHAPTER IX [83]

A DINNER AT SEVEN-THIRTY

BY five o'clock the next afternoon Ewing had ended his journey in an upper room of the Stuyvesant Hotel. This hostelry flaunts an outworn magnificence. Its hangings are dingy, its plenteous gilt is tarnished; and it seems to live on memories of a past when fashion splendidly thronged its corridors. But peace lies beyond the gloom of its portals, and Ewing was glad to be housed from the dazing tumult outside. Nothing reached him now but the muted rhythm of horses' feet on the asphalt below, and this but recalled agreeably to him that his solitude was an artificial thing of four walls. He had no wish to forget that the world waited beyond his door.

He fell back on the sofa, a once lordly thing of yellow satin, now frayed and faded, to eye the upper reaches of the room. The high, blue-tinted ceiling was scarred and cracked. Depending from its center a huge chandelier dangled glittering prisms of glass. An immense mirror in a gilt frame, lavishly rococo, rested on the mantel of carved white marble. Heavy lace curtains, shrouding the two broad windows, made a restful half light.

He had awakened to hills that morning, wooded hills and well towned. Then had come veritable cities, rich to him with all romance under their angular, smoky ugliness. And at last had come the real city—the end of the world and its center. He discovered it beyond a stretch of white-flecked [84] water alive with strange craft. Its clean, straight, myriad-windowed towers glowed under a slanting sun in an air as crystal clear as that of his own hills. A vista of heart-shaking surprises unfolded ahead of the great boat they boarded, a boat with a heart strongly beating in tune with his own. Too soon it nosed its way, with a sort of clumsy finesse, into a pile-walled pocket. There followed the keen, quick rattling of a cogged wheel and a rush of people who seemed insufficiently impressed by the magnitude of the event. Then they entered a cab, to be driven from a throng of other cabs and jostling pedestrians through the maze of a dream come true. He tried not to ignore his companion for glimpses of that strange life through the cab window.

Very casually she had said at parting, "Thank you so much for all your care of me—and dine with us at seven-thirty, won't you? I shall try to have a friend here that I think may help you."

A long time he lay, reviewing that chaotic first hour in the world. Everything throbbed here, it seemed. One lived more quickly. And how long could the body endure it? Suddenly he felt his own pulses beating at a rate to terrify. He caught his breath and listened. He could hear the monstrous beats—they were actually shaking the sofa on which he lay. He thought of heart disease. He might be dying there—and they would wait dinner for him. He sprang up desperately. The sinister beating ceased. He put his hand to his heart, listened tensely, and heard again that which had alarmed him, the pulsing beat of a steam pump somewhere far below. In his relief he

laughed aloud.

As he set about opening his trunks he was marveling at clothes lines he had seen stretched [85] high between the rear walls of houses. How did people ever hang clothes on lines fifty feet from the ground? Truly it was a city of wonders.

He took out a suit of evening clothes that had been his father's. He had found that the suit fitted him, and he and Ben had assured themselves by reference to the pictured heroes in magazine advertisements that its cut was nearly enough in the prevailing mode. Ewing had also found some cards of his father's which would convey his own name to all who might care to read it.

As he sauntered out at the dinner hour he wished that Ben could be watching him. The Bartell house was in Ninth Street, less than a long block from his hotel, a broad, plain-fronted, three-story house of red brick trimmed with white marble. Caught in a little eddy from the stream heading in Washington Square and sweeping north, it had kept an old-time air of dignity and comfort. Ewing observed a cheering glow through the muslin curtains at the windows as he ascended the three marble steps. The old white door, crowned with a fanlight and retaining its brass knocker, had suffered the indignity of an electric bell, but this was obscurely placed at the side, and he lifted the knocker's lion head. As no bell rang, he dropped it, and was dismayed by its metallic clamor. He swiftly meditated flight, thinking to return for a seemlier demonstration. But the door swung back and a person in evening dress stood aside to bow him in.

"Ah, good evening!" exclaimed Ewing cordially. Then, embarrassed, he felt for a card, recalling that he was in a land where, probably, one could not be cordial to persons who opened doors. [86]

"For Mrs. Laithe," he said, in grave tones, eying the man's bluntly cut features with a severity meant to dispel any wrong impression. The person received the card on a tiny silver plate, relieved him of hat and coat with what seemed to Ewing an uncanny deftness, bowed him to the gloom of a large apartment on the left, and vanished. An instant later he reappeared, drew portiéres aside, revealing another warmly lighted room, and Ewing beheld a white vision of his hostess.

"I'm glad to have a word with you," she began. "Sit here. You're to meet a friend, Ned Piersoll, who will tell you a lot of things. I telephoned him directly I came in, and he found he could come, though he must run when he's eaten—some affair with his mother. But he'll have found out about you."

"I'm much obliged to you," he stammered, having caught little of her speech.

"Ned will tell you what to do. He knows everybody. He's on the staff of the Knickerbocker magazine, and he had a novel out last spring, 'The Promotion of Fools,' that you must have seen advertised everywhere, like a medicine."

"Yes, I've read that book."

"You must tell him if you liked it—they all care to hear that—and he'll see that you meet men of your own kind." For looking at her he had been able to give her words little attention. She had revealed herself anew in the dull white of a gown that brought out the elusive glow of her face. Her eyes were deep wells, shaded but luminous, under the lusterless dark of her hair, and her smile flashed a girlish benignity upon him. Acutely alive was he to the line of neck and shoulder [87] and arm, a slender, supple neck, set on shoulders superbly but lightly modeled, the small collarbone exquisitely muffled but not lost, and the little hollow at the base of her throat prettily definite. And all was white and lusterless save the warning dusk of her eyes and the flash from her parting lips.

With such cold passion for line did his artist's eye wreak its joy upon her that, as she talked, she found herself thinking him curiously dull to the prospect she opened. It was the impersonal look she had come to know; and his replies were languid, as if he thought of other matters. It might have passed for the bored ease of a man of the world had she not known him to be amid novel surroundings.

Feeling a slight discomfort under his look, she at length diverted his eyes to the room in which they sat.

"It's the room I like best in all the house," she said. "That big drawing room you came through is inhuman. It terrified me as a child, and still refuses to make friends with me, but this library—don't you feel that I've humanized it?"

He became aware that he had felt its easing charm of dark-toned wood and dull-red walls. There were low book-shelves, low seats that invited, a broad table with its array of magazines, and a lazy fire in the open grate.

"It's a fine room to be in," he said, bringing his eyes back to her.

"There's not a chair in it," she continued, "that wasn't meant to be sat in—most chairs nowadays are mere spectacles, you know—and no glass doors before the books. Nothing enrages [88] me like having to open a door to get at books."

"It's the room you need," he replied. "You draw all the light to yourself. It gives you color, turns your hair to black, and makes your eyes look like——"

"Mr. Piersoll!" announced the man.

His look still engaged her as she floated forward to greet the tall, pleasant-faced, alert young man with tumbled yellow hair who now entered. Not until he heard his own name did he relinquish her to acknowledge the word of introduction.

A moment later the father of Mrs. Laithe strolled in and Ewing was again introduced, this time to a stoutish man with a placid, pink face, scanty hair going from yellow to white—arranged over his brow with scrupulous economy—and a closely cut mustache of the same ambiguous hue. He was a man who gracefully confessed fifty years to all but the better informed. Ewing felt himself under the scrutiny of a pair of very light gray eyes as Bartell took his hand, tentatively at first, then with a grip of entire cordiality. One may suspect that this gentleman had looked forward with mild apprehension to a dinner meeting with the latest protégé of his impulsive daughter. The youth's demeanor, however, so quickly caused his barbaric past to be forgotten that, by the time they were at table, his host had said to him, prefacing one of his best anecdotes, "Of course you know that corner table on the Café de la Paix terrace...."

Ewing floated dreamily on the stream of talk; laughing, chatty talk, spiced with suggestive strange names; blithe gossip of random happenings. He was content to feel its flow beneath him and rather resented the efforts to involve him in it, preferring to listen and to look. But he was [89] courteously groped for by the others and compelled to response as the dinner progressed.

Piersoll mentioned his drawings pleasantly and engaged him for dinner at a club the following evening. "I'll call for you at the Stuyvesant about six," he said, when Ewing had accepted. "I must have a look at your stuff. Don't dress; we dine in our working clothes at the Monastery."

The father of Mrs. Laithe warned Ewing to beware of worry in his new surroundings.

"Let life carry you, my boy. That's my physiology in a nutshell. Don't try to lug the world about. The people who tell you that life in New York is a strain haven't learned rational living. Worry kills, but I never worry, and I find town idyllic. Clarence was born to worry: result, dyspepsia and nervous breakdown. My daughter worries. She goes into side streets looking for trouble, and when she finds it she keeps it. That's wrong. Life is whatever we see it to be. Eleanor sees too much of the black side, poverty, starvation, hard luck—all kinds of deviltry, and it reacts on her. I look only on the cheerful side, and that reacts on me. A good dinner, a glass of burgundy—there's an answer to all that socialistic pessimism."

"Suppose one hasn't the answer at hand?" his daughter broke in.

"Keep smiling, my dear," retorted her father with Spartan grimness. "Skipping a dinner or two can't overturn real philosophy. Down on the Chesapeake last fall, duck shooting one day, we lost the luncheon hamper overboard, and hadn't so much as a biscuit from four in the morning till after nine at night, shooting from a chilly, wet blind all day. *There* was a test! But I give you my [90] word I never worried. I took it as so much discipline. My dear, if I had fretted over tenement houses the way you have, I should be a broken man. Thank the gods that be, I've had the wit to let my agent do all that!"

His daughter received this with a shrug of despair. "But confess, daddy—you *have* a worry."

"'Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt!'" quoted Piersoll, divining her mark.

"I admit, my dear, that legitimate worry has its uses. I only warn against the too common abuse of it. I maintain," he went on, turning to Ewing, "that a man with the feelings of a boy should, if there's any moral balance in the world, retain the waistline of a boy; yet I've not done it. I go to doctors—they all talk the same ballyrot about exercise or they harangue you about diet. Why, I've heard them gibber of things one mustn't eat till I writhed in anguish. Some day I know I shall chuck it all and let Nature take her course." He glared defiantly about the table.

"She's not waiting for you to let her, dear," observed his daughter maliciously.

"It's my temperament, I suppose"—he sighed ruefully into his plate of sweet stuff—"just as it's Randy Teevan's temperament to keep slender, though I suspect Randy of stays."

Mrs. Laithe had glanced swiftly toward Ewing at the mention of this name. She again looked at him alertly a moment later when the man announced "Mr. Teevan and Mr. Alden Teevan."

"Alden told me this afternoon at the club, my dear, that he and his father might stop for a moment on their way up town, just to say 'How-de-do.' We can have coffee in the library." [91]

His daughter received this with a meditative under lip. Then she brightened.

"I'm sure you men would rather sit here and smoke while I run in and see them. They'll stay only a minute."

"Nonsense, child! I can't lose sight of you so soon again. We can smoke in there as well."

"Coffee in the library, Harris." She gave the order with a submissive shrug and led the way out.

Ewing saw two men come to greet her, alike enough of feature to reveal their relationship at first glance. He detected, however, a curious contrast they presented. The father, slight and short of stature, was a very young-looking old man, while the son was an old-looking young man. The father was dapper, effusive, sprightly, quick with smiling gestures; the son restrained, deliberate,

low-toned with a slow, half-cynical smile of waiting. He gave the effect of subduing what his father almost elfishly expressed.

Father and son greeted the men over the shoulders of Mrs. Laithe, and Ewing was presented. There was an inclination of the son's head, and a careless glance of his waiting eyes; from the father, a jerky, absent "How-d'you do—How-d'you do!"

They moved by chatting stages to the library. The elder Teevan, carefully pointing the ends of his small, dark mustache, stood with his back to the dying fire, a coffee cup in one hand, a cigarette in the other, twittering gallantly of a town's desolation wrought by the going away of Mrs. Laithe; and of a town renewed by her great-hearted return. "A preciously timed relenting," [92] he called it, with a challenging sigh toward the lady, as he gracefully flicked back a ringlet of the lustrous brown hair that had fallen low on his brow. Ewing thought it wonderful hair on a man whose face, though ruddy in hue, showed signs of age. There were deep lines at the corners of those gallantly flashing eyes, and their under lids drooped. The skin was shrunk tightly over the high, thin nose, the cheeks were less than plump, and the neck revealed some unhappy wrinkles. Sadly, too, his voice failed at supreme moments. It was tragic, Ewing thought, to listen to a sentence valiantly begun, only to hear the voice crack on a crucial word.

Mrs. Laithe received the little man's tribute with a practiced indifference, chatting absently, meanwhile, with the son. Presently she led Ewing and the younger Teevan to the drawing room to admire a huge jar of roses for which she thanked Teevan.

Back in the library Piersoll was listening to a salmon-fishing story of Bartell's. The elder Teevan genially overlooked the scene, humming lightly to himself the catch air from a late musical comedy. He turned to study a bit of Japanese bronze on the mantel behind him, screwing a single glass into an eye. When he had scanned the bronze with a fine little air of appreciation he replaced it, resumed his jaunty humming, and idly picked up a card that had been thrown beside it. Carelessly under the still fixed monocle he brought the words "Mr. Gilbert Denham Ewing." A moment he held it so in fingers that suddenly trembled. His head went sharply back, the glass dropped from his eye, dangling on its silken ribbon, and his little song died. He glanced about him, observing the two groups to be still inattentive. Placing a supporting hand on the mantel he [93] set the glass firmly again and studied the card a second time. Another glance through the rooms, and he resumed his song, crumpling the card in his hand. Then, turning, he stood once more before the fire, his hands comfortably at his back. One of them tossed the card into the grate, and his song again ceased.

Bartell looked up, having, after incredible finesse, slain and weighed his giant salmon. Piersoll, recalling that the anecdotist had killed other salmon in his time, made a hasty adieu and went to his hostess, who lingered in the drawing room with the younger men. Teevan, before the fire, breathed in smoke, emitted it from pursed lips, studied the ash at the end of his cigarette from under raised, speculative brows, and flashed search-light eyes upon his host.

"Who's the young chap, Chris?"

Bartell took up a liqueur glass and turned to his questioner.

"Name's Ewing, I believe. Some chap Eleanor picked up in the far West. Painter, I believe, or means to be."

"Painter, yes, to be sure—quite right; painter...." He waited pointedly.

"Paints cowboys and Indians, I fancy—the usual thing. Seems a decent sort; rather a gentleman. You're looking a bit off. Randy."

"Am I, though? Queer! Never felt fitter. Walked to Fifty-ninth Street and back to-day. Might have overdone a bit. That chap staying in town long?"

"Have to ask Eleanor. It's her affair. By Jove, old boy, you *are* a wonder. I wish I could keep it off around here the way you do."

The little man drew himself up, expanded his chest, and bravely flourished a smile of [94] acknowledgment. This faded into a look of hostile curiosity, discreetly veiled, as Mrs. Laithe and the two young men came in from the drawing room.

"Time to be moving on, Governor," young Teevan remarked.

"I'm not going, my boy," the little man answered in crisp tones, with the hint of a side look at Ewing and Mrs. Laithe. "Run on like a good chap and make my excuses to the dear grandmother. Needn't lie, you know. Say I chucked her theater party at the last moment because the places are stuffy. Say that I loathe plush and those crumpy little boxes where one sees nothing but the gas fellow in a gingham jumper yawning in the wings. Say I'm whimsical, capricious, fickle as April zephyrs—in all but my love for her. If you're quite honest she'll disbelieve you and guess that I'd a reason for stopping away. Run, like a good lad, while I quench a craving for tales of adventure from the most charming of her sex and from our young friend here—will you pardon my oversight —Ewing?—Ah, to be sure, from Mr. Ewing—-Ewing. I must remember that. I'm a silly ass about names."

But when his son had gone the little man appeared to forget the craving that had prompted his stay. From his stand on the hearth rug he jauntily usurped the talk, winging his way down the

world stream of gossip from capital to capital. Circuitous, indeed, was his approach to art; an anecdote of studio life in Paris; a criticism of Rodin, "Whitman in marble;" the vigor of our native art impulse, only now learning to withdraw a slavish deference from the French schools. "And you—Mr.—Ah, yes—Ewing, to be sure—our amiable and rotund host tells me that you are to be a warrior in this fray of brush and chisel. Bravo! You shall show me work." [95]

Ewing had listened to his recondite discourse chiefly with a morbid expectancy of that recurrent break in the voice, straining until it came and relaxing until it quavered back to the hazardous masculine level. Finding himself thus noticed he stammered, "Oh, I—I've done some work in black and white. I hope—Mrs. Laithe has encouraged me."

"A charming modesty, yours; by no means the besetting sin of your craft, but is Mrs. Laithe an ideal promoter of genius? I fancy you'll need a sterner guide, one to be harsh as well as kind. Women can't be that, least of all the charming specimen who has honored you with her patronage. I shall be proud to supplement her deficiencies as critic—her glorious, her fascinating deficiencies. Women, audacious souls, are recklessly kind. They incur perils to chill the blood of brave enough men, meaning monstrously well all the time"—his narrowed eyes sought to read the face of Mrs. Laithe—"but I've yet to see one worth a second look who had divined that there exists a certain arbitrary relation between cause and effect. Need I word the inference?... No?..." Relieved by his scrutiny of her face he broke off, his heart leaping to the thought, "She doesn't know—doesn't know ... the *fool*!"

"I'll be glad to show you what I have," Ewing answered, rejoicing at this solicitude in a critic so obviously eminent. "I've been afraid all along that Mrs. Laithe might be too kind."

"Kinder than she knew—kindness is no word for her excess. Women lack fiber where their sympathies are involved. They'll not inflict pain within scope of their imaginations—beyond that rather narrow field of course they're merciless, bless them! But trust me to score your work if it deserves that, and trust me to praise if it merits praise. You shall exhibit to me. By the way"—he consulted a small enameled watch—"I've a bit of time to spare. If you're stepping along I'll not mind looking at your things this evening." [96]

Ewing arose, glowing with pleasure. He felt drawn to this wonderful little man who knew everything, and who was visibly kind—just, at any rate—under that fantastic cloak of severity.

"You're very good," he said. "I'm staying close by, at the Stuyvesant."

"Drop in often, Ewing," urged Bartell as they shook hands. "And don't let Teevan put you down. I dare say you'll come on, you know, if you chuck worry."

As he parted from Mrs. Laithe he was aware of a new look in her eyes. He had learned to read them. They sought now to tell him ... what? There was a warning in them, and her glance seemed to enfold him almost protectingly. But her words were not more than those of formal parting, with a suggestion that he drop in for tea some afternoon soon.

CHAPTER X [97]

THE WAY OF THE LITTLE MAN

THEY walked briskly to the Stuyvesant in silence, for Ewing could think of nothing to say, and his companion seemed preoccupied. He showed, indeed, the stress of some excitement, for Ewing once heard him mutter heatedly. Suspecting this to be meant for himself, he evoked by inquiry only an impatient "Not here—not here!" He believed that his distinguished companion must be engrossed for the moment with something profounder than the drawings of a novice.

At the hotel they ascended to Ewing's room. Indicating a chair to Teevan he went to the mantel for matches. When he had set the room to sudden light he stepped quickly back, for the little man, standing there, glared at him in a panic of fear and disgust.

In the shock of his embarrassment Ewing fumbled at his overcoat and slowly drew it off. Teevan's eyes now blazed rage upon him. His small, withered, blue-veined hands were tightly clenched at his sides. His attitude was almost a crouch. Ewing felt a furtive amusement above his dismay, at sight of the dapper little figure in this incongruous battle pose.

A moment they stood so, then the upper lip of Teevan lifted slowly to a snarl. Seeing that he was about to speak, there ran with Ewing's amazement an absurd apprehension of that break in the voice.

"What do you mean by it?" The swiftness, the intensity of the utterance held the voice level thus far, but the break came with the next words, and the speech ended in a wail. [98]

"What do you think to gain by coming here—by hounding me—by hounding *me*?"

Ewing constrained himself to quiet, with an impulse to soothe this inexplicable fury.

"Please sit down, won't you? You were going to criticise my drawings, you know. You suggested it a moment ago, and I thought—" He took up a portfolio of sketches from one of the open trunks.

"Your trash! What's that to me? Do you think to pass this off? You've learned effrontery in a fine school. Come to the point. What can you make by this indecency—this——"

Ewing's look checked him—something genuine in his bewilderment.

"Come," began Teevan again, "is it possible you're no one, after all, instead of being less than no one? You know me, don't you?"

"Of course I know you; Mrs. Laithe introduced us."

"Oh, don't juggle. You can't swagger it off with me. You shall not hound me or mine."

"Hound?" Ewing sought for light, still trying to subdue this absurd assailant.

"Hound, I said, you smug brat! You know me—you've not forgotten my name so soon."

"Teevan, I believe. Really, Mr. Teevan—I——"

"Randall Gordon Teevan! The name meant something to you, didn't it?"

"No; it didn't mean anything to me."

"Ah! say that again!" He came toward the younger man to peer up into his face with a grinning, incredulous scowl. "Say it again!" [99]

Ewing drew back from his scrutiny with a slight impatience.

"Why say it again? Isn't once enough? You hear well, don't you? What should your name mean to me?"

"You still try to carry *that* off? Your game isn't ready to play?"

Ewing resumed his patient search.

"See here, Mr. Teevan, let's be very quiet and get at this. I never heard your name until an hour ago. Perhaps it ought to mean something to me, but it doesn't. I'm not well acquainted in New York; I only came here to-day. Now"—his voice became cajoling—"suppose you sit down there quietly and tell me all about yourself."

"Your name is Ewing, isn't it?"

"Of course!"

"What's your full name?"

"Gilbert Denham Ewing."

"Damn him!"

"Damn him? You are speaking of me?"

"Not you—you cub!"

"Another Ewing?"

"Another Gilbert Denham Ewing!"

"I never knew any other but my father. And you wouldn't be damning him."

He said this with a confident smile, and the peering little man at last read him accurately. An impalpable veil seemed to screen his scowling face. Erect from his peering stoop he passed a small hand dazedly across his brow, and his face had become pleasantly ingenuous, alive with a half-comprehending regret. With a rueful laugh he put out a hand to Ewing, who took it, to say the least, doubtfully. [100]

"A thousand pardons, my boy! I fear I've suffered an attack of nervous aberration to which I am unhappily subject. It's most distressing. I'm chagrined beyond measure by the annoyance I must have caused you, I give no end of worry to my specialist by these seizures. My speech wandered provokingly, I dare say. It always does. You'd not credit some of the things I've said to my dearest friends at such times. But you can fancy the mortification it is to me. You'll pardon me, I trust—youth's charity for the failings of age. The horrid truth is that I'm a bit oldish—not aged, not outworn, mind you—my years have come and gone lightly—but at times like these I'm obliged to admit the count. Come, you'll forget?"

Ewing delightedly pressed his hand. He could believe the little man's tale of his years. The hair that he had remarked for its young look had been uncannily twisted on the head of its wearer during the flurry of his transport. An area of luminous scalp now showed above one ear.

He stammered awkward but heartfelt words of assurance.

"Doubtless it quite bowled you over," Teevan pursued—"though I never can recall what I've

said; but let us forget, and, if you'd not mind, let us say nothing of it to anyone—to Mrs. Laithe, for example. If it came to the ears of my son—he's over-anxious about me already."

"Certainly, I'll not speak of it, and I'm sorry, very sorry. Lay your gloves on the mantel there and find a seat." He turned to his trunk, hoping the little man would sight his head in the mirror. [101] When he again looked up the hair was in perfect adjustment, and Teevan beamed on him from an armchair.

"Your father," he began, "I seem to recall your saying it—was a painter. Doubtless he taught you much."

"I studied with him there in the mountains till he died. I've nothing left of his but this portrait of my mother."

He took the unframed canvas from the tray of the trunk and held it before his guest.

"Do you get the right light there?"

It had been a bad quarter of an hour for Ewing, and, as he adjusted the picture, he felt a moment's satisfaction in having weathered it so plausibly. And now that the curious little gentleman seemed restored, it was pleasant to anticipate his cultured appreciation of that work of art which was the boy's chief treasure.

"There isn't any shine across it now, is there?" he asked, and looked up with a shy, proud, waiting smile.

But the agitations that had gone before were as nothing to what now passed in front of his dismayed eyes. One moment his guest hung staring at the canvas with a goblin horror; then, uttering a kind of sob, he shot incontinently out of the door.

The harried Ewing dropped the picture and rushed in pursuit. He came up with the little man at the head of the stairs. He was trembling, and his face was ashen gray; but after a few deep breaths he smiled and waved a hand jauntily to indicate humorous despair. It seemed to say, "I am frequently like this—it's annoying past words." He spoke of needing a restorative and suggested an advisable haste in the direction of the café.

"They've some choice old cognac downstairs. Suppose we chat over a bit of it. I'm rather done [102] up. These absurd attacks of mine react on the heart. A noggin of brandy will fetch me about. You'll come?"

They were presently at a table in the hotel café.

"We've the room to ourselves," said Teevan genially. "Delightful old place, this; restful, reminiscent, mellow—and generally empty. I detest the cheap glitter of those uptown places with their rowdy throngs. They make me feel like a fish in a fiddle box, as our French cousins say. You'll have soda with yours?"

Teevan drank his own brandy neat, and at once refilled his glass.

"Now for a chat about yourself, my young friend—for surely only a friend could have borne with me as tenderly as you have this evening. You're a fellow of promise—the future clamors for you—your drawings enchant me."

Ewing reflected that his drawings had not been exposed, but the intention was kind, and he was grateful for that. Teevan drank more brandy with a dainty relish, and begged to hear of his young friend's adventures in the far hills.

Ewing expanded in the warmth of this kindly concern. He told, little by little, under adroit prompting, what he had to tell. Teevan displayed a gratifying interest, especially in what he recounted of his mother's death. But at intervals during this recital the young man became conscious, with astonishment, that there was an inexplicable look on the other's face, a look which he suddenly discovered to be an unbelievable veiled pleasure.

He fell back with a quick, blind repulsion, and the two stared at each other, the elder man [103] dissolving with difficulty a monstrous smile. He appeared to recover himself with an effort, finding the lines about his mouth refractory, but his embarrassment was so poignant that Ewing felt sorry for him.

"You *must* forgive me, old fellow! These damned treacherous nerves of mine! I shall see that specialist chap of mine directly in the morning. I'm so weak that the sadness of that poor lady's death set me off into something like hysteria."

It was one o'clock when they parted, and then only at a hint that the place would close its old-fashioned doors for the night. Ewing rejoiced to feel that he had made a desirable friend. He liked the little man well. Teevan had said at the last. "You should move on to Paris, my boy. You'll need the touch they give only in that blessed rendezvous of the masters." Ewing went to his room realizing that the world of his dreams did actually abound in adventure. His first day had been memorable.

Teevan walked through Ninth Street to his own home, a few doors beyond the Bartell house. It was a place of much the same old-fashioned lines, that had withstood the north-setting current.

He let himself in and went to the dining room at the rear. Here he lighted a gas jet, took a decanter from the sideboard, and brought a glass and a bottle of soda from the butler's pantry. He sipped the drink and lighted a cigarette. His musings, as first reflected in his face, were agreeable. His mouth twitched pleasantly, his eyes glistened. At intervals he chuckled and muttered. With an increase of brandy in the glass he became more serious.

[104] When Alden Teevan entered an hour later he found his father in a mood astonishingly savage. At sight of his son the little man became vocal with meaningless abuse. It was as if the presence of a listener incited him to continue aloud some tirade that he had pursued in silence. But the younger Teevan, lounging in the doorway, only stared with polite concern as he was greeted with these emotional phrases:

"—a damned milk-and-water Narcissus—a pretentious cub with the airs of a cheap manikin of the world—a squeaking parasite—a toadlike, damned obscenity——"

An easy smile came to the son's face as he noted the fallen tide in the decanter.

"Night-night, my quaint, amiable father—and cheery dreams!"

They studied each other a moment. The elder man seemed to meditate some disclosure, but stopped on the verge of it.

"That's all, my boy!"

The young man laughed again.

"It's enough, I fancy—but don't overdo it, Randy. You know one mustn't at your age."

"I'm taking care, taking care of everything, my boy—never you fear——"

The other passed on, but stopped at the stairway and called back:

"I say, Randy!"

"Yes—yes——"

"Get to bed, you absurd little rat, you!"

CHAPTER XI

[105]

A NIGHT AT THE MONASTERY

EWING awoke late the next morning, rejoicing that he need not cook his breakfast. After feeding his hill-born hunger with novel and exciting foods he sauntered out to become a wave on the tide that flooded those strange, heart-shaking streets. He mentally blazed his trail as he went. His soul marched to the swift and cheerful stepping of the life about him. He remembered Ben's warnings and wished that expert in urban evil could see how little menacing was this splendid procession. That the Saturday throng of shoppers and pleasure seekers was unaware of the greatness of the moment to him lent a zest of secrecy to his scouting.

Back and forth he wandered on Broadway, the moving crowds, volatile as quicksilver, holding him with a hypnotic power. Often he stopped before some shop, hotel, or theater that he had come to know in print. Not until five o'clock did he find that he was leg weary. Then he took his bearings and, in his own phrase, "made back to camp."

A boy brought him Piersoll's card at six, and Piersoll followed. He came with that alert self-possession which Ewing had come to consider typical of these dwellers in a crowd where each is the inconsiderable part of a great organic body, and must yet preserve his unique oneship.

[106] "Bully old place, this," Piersoll began. "My mother came to balls here thirty years ago. Show me your stuff."

He dropped into one of the armchairs and lighted a cigarette.

Ewing opened a portfolio and placed drawings along the wall. Piersoll slid his chair closer and studied them.

"They're only little things I've seen," murmured Ewing. "I haven't had a chance to see much."

Piersoll blew out smoke and arose to put one of the drawings in a better light. He gazed at this closely, swept his eye again over the others, and exclaimed, "All right! Bully! Good drawing, and the real thing. That's the point—you've drawn only what you've seen. They're not all equally interesting, but they're all true. You'll do."

"I'm glad you like them. I never knew if they were good."

"They're better than I expected, from Mrs. Laithe's talk. She was so keen about them, I made allowances."

"Mrs. Laithe seemed to think I might sell them."

"Some of those you can sell, undoubtedly. The others show what you can do. They'll get your orders. The magazines are using a lot of Western stuff. That ranchman's wife there in her poor little flower garden, surrounded by a million miles of sage and cactus—fine! It's a story picture, and the story's good. The Knickerbocker might use that. They might want a series from you—six drawings or so—'Scenes of Ranch Life.'"

"It sounds too good."

"It's not, and you'll get stories to illustrate. Can you draw a pretty cowboy?"

"Pretty?"

"The kind in the magazine story. Harvard man, half-back, old New York family, named Van-Something or other; unhappy love affair; tries ranch life; fearless rider, dead shot 'six feet of clean-limbed, virile young manhood,' is the approved phrase for him. He's a beautiful thing—his man keeps his chaps pressed, and he never is seen needing a shave——" [107]

Ewing grinned appreciatively.

"Girl comes out from New York," continued Piersoll—"*the* girl, with her fierce aunt—home on north side of Washington Square. I'm going to do an article on the story people who've had fine old homes on the north side of Washington Square—thousands! That one block would have to be ten miles long to hold 'em. Girl in tea gown, fierce aunt with lorgnon—threatened with death—flood, fire, Apaches, stage-robbers, vicious bull, rattler—anything! Rescued by cool, daring, clean-limbed Van-Soforth, who says 'By Jove!' as he risks his life. That is, if it's in one of the respectable magazines. If it's only a young ten-center he says 'Damn!' right out in print. Then, love scene on mesa, faithful cow pony and mountains in background, and return to New York by next train, with clean-limbed Harold in one of our gent's nobby sack suits that sets off the unconscious grace of his slight but muscular figure—oh, you know the story."

"I have read it somewhere—something like it."

"You'll go on reading it. But you'll have to pretty your cowboys if you make the pictures for it. Hulston usually illustrates it. He can draw a cowboy that would make a bunch of violets look coarse."

"I'm afraid I couldn't——"

"Of course you couldn't. But you'll find work. Some of the magazines are becoming reckless and printing stories of cowboys that are almost real. Come along to the club. You'll meet some fellows there. The chap that printed my book is dining with me, but he'll slip off early and we can have the evening together." [108]

"I liked your book," Ewing ventured, when they were in the street.

"Well, that's comforting. I dare say it was easier to read than it was to write. But about this club you're going to—it's a little place we've started lately—illustrators, newspaper men, book writers and that ilk. You must join. I believe I'll be safe in putting you up."

"I never joined a club," Ewing confessed. "Are there conditions?"

"Rigid ones—you must have ten dollars for the entrance-fee, and not be a leper."

"Well"—Ewing debated—"I have the money——"

"That's all *you* need think about. The other part is ours. We have you in to dine and look you over. Lots of men go there with an idea that they must be witty. One fellow was turned down last week for springing 'made' jokes at the table. I believe he spoke of 'quail on trust' as we were served with that bird—and in the hearing of three members of the board of Abbots. That settled him, of course. They didn't need his imitations of a German dialect comedian, which he sought to convulse them with later. Another man was turned down lately for saying, 'Oh, how quaintly bohemian!' after he'd looked about the grill room. Another was ejected for playing 'chopsticks' on the piano with the edges of his hands. They didn't even let *him* get to the table. That's the sort of thing—and we're strict, even though we need the money. I'm bursar and I know. There are weird jests about my decamping with the club funds, but I've never had enough surplus yet to take me beyond Rahway." [109]

They ascended the steps of a dingy-fronted brick house in Clinton Place, a little out of the Broadway rush. Passing through a bare, echoing hall, they entered one of the two dining rooms of the club, connected by immense sliding doors, now thrown open. They were broad, lofty rooms with stained floors, mantels of gray marble, and rich old doors of polished mahogany framed in white casements—the drawing rooms of some staid family of a bygone generation, before the trade army had invaded this once quiet neighborhood.

Ewing at once noticed the walls. They had been covered with a grayish-brown cartridge paper, and on this the members of the Monastery had plied their charcoal in fancies more or less attuned to the spirit of the organization. There were monks in most of the pictures, monks

combating or, alas! overborne by one or another of that meretricious trinity which ever conspires against godly living. Over the mantel in the first room a pink-fleshed nymph in simple garb of chef's cap allured an all but yielding St. Anthony with one of the club's dinner *menus* held before his hunger-lit eyes. On a panel to the right of this a befuddled lay brother, having emptied a flagon of wine, perched on the arm of a chair and angled fatuously in a jar of mocking goldfish, to the refrain:

"For to-morrow will be Friday, and
We've caught no fish to-day!"

To the left, Brother Hilarius furtively ignored his breviary as he passed a gay *affiche*, from which a silken-limbed dancer beguiled him with nimble, worldly caperings, and smiles of the flesh and the devil. [110]

"There's a vacant panel or two in the other room," said Piersoll. "We'll save one for you. Come down to the grill room—it's early yet."

They went out through the hall and down a narrow stairway. They heard the lively hum of voices, and Ewing found himself in a low, wainscoted room, finished in dull gray, where a dozen or so men talked loungingly in corners, awaiting the dinner hour.

Piersoll presented him to several of these in so quick a succession that their names became a many-syllabled murmur in his ears. They found seats on a red-cushioned corner bench of churchly pattern, and Piersoll ordered cocktails.

Ewing tried to follow the talk running about him. A boyish-looking reporter for a morning paper was telling at a nearby table how he had been the first to reach the scene of a railroad wreck in Pennsylvania late the night before by fording a swollen river. At another table a successful playwright obligingly expounded the laws of dramatic construction to a respectful novice, who seemed puzzled by their simplicity. At their own table a youth of yellow melancholy confided to Piersoll that the afternoon had witnessed an important transaction in verse—the sale of his ballade, "She Was a Belle in the Days of Daguerre." "The editor of 'Quips' took it and paid on acceptance—let's have another," he added with deep significance.

The atmosphere of the place was unthinkingly democratic. The cub reporter here met his city editor as man to man. Piersoll identified various members of the gathering—the dramatic critic of an evening paper in busy talk with the Wall Street man of the same sheet; a promising young composer cornered by the star reporter of a morning paper, a grizzled knight of the world of war, crime, flood, fire, and all mischance of any news value, a man who had attained the dignity of signing his "stuff." Old men and young, they were compacted of nerves, vividly alive, even those in whom the desk stoop could be detected. [111]

The movable feast of the cocktail waned and the groups drifted upstairs. The publisher for whom Piersoll waited came at last, a bland but keen-eyed gentleman of early middle age, introduced to Ewing as Mr. Layton, of Layton & Company. They followed the others up to the dining room, and Piersoll found a table for three under the drawing of the earnest but miscalculating angler.

Ewing nervously apprehended talk of an abstruse literary character from which he would be debarred. The talk assuredly became abstruse, but it dealt in literary values solely as related to public taste in the novel of commerce, and to the devices of Layton & Company for divining and stimulating that variable quantity.

Instead of descanting on Shakespeare, as Ewing had supposed a publisher would do, Layton, with the soup, plunged into a racy narrative of how he had "boomed" sales of "The Mask of Malcolm" the year before. That had been a success compounded of trifles. Witness Layton's chance view from a car window of a "Mask of Malcolm" poster on a watering cart that toiled through the dusty main street of a remote Western village. He had written to the postmaster of that town for the name of the cart's driver, sent him a copy of the novel inscribed by the author, and enough more posters to cover his cart. Result: a sale in the aroused village and surrounding country of two hundred and eighty "Masks," where otherwise not more than half a dozen would have been sold. Further result: the watering carts of the great mid-West were now cunningly blazoned with incitements to purchase Layton & Company's fiction. [112]

Ewing still feared Shakespeare or Chaucer, or George Eliot, at the least; but the publisher clung to earth, launching into his plans for Piersoll's next book. "The Promotion of Fools" was in its hundredth thousand. The next book must go beyond this.

"You want a smashing good love scene at the end," urged the sapient Layton, "and plenty of good, plain, honest heart feeling all through it. Make a quaintly humorous character, simple-minded, trusting, but still shrewd, and win the reader's sympathy for him by giving him some sort of hard luck—a crippled child that dies isn't bad, if the father has been harsh to him some time, not meaning to be, you know. And not too much dialect; enough to contrast well with the Fifth Avenue people. Then, with the kind of hero you know how to draw—swell family, handsome, refined, a real gentleman, and all that sort of thing, with an English valet—you'll have a story that will *go*. You can write a winner, Piersoll, if you'll listen to your publisher. We keep our fingers on the public pulse; we know the taste better than you can know it, shut up in your office. And have a good, catchy dedication—people are interested in your personality. Couldn't you have in the next book something like 'To my Mother in Heaven, whose Memory——'"

"Our people are all Unitarians," suggested Piersoll. [113]

"What difference does *that* make——"

"And my mother has been graciously spared to us——"

"Well, then, 'To my Gray-haired Mother, whose Loving Counsel has ever—' *you* know the sort of thing, short and snappy, but full of feeling. It helps, let me tell you, with the people who pick up a book on the stands."

Ewing lost the run of this talk for a time, entertaining himself with a study of the other diners. The rooms had rapidly filled, and two waiters scurried among the tables. His attention focused on a long table in the center of the room, whose occupants made savage and audible comment on diners at other tables, and confided to one another, in loud, free tones, their frank impressions of late comers.

The door opened upon a goodly youth in evening dress. Seven pairs of eyes from the big table fixed him coldly as he removed his overcoat.

A voice, affectedly mincing: "As I live—handsome Harold Armytage!"

Another voice, hoarse with rage: "Curse ye, devil that ye are, with yer oily tongue and city ways! where's me daughter Letty, me little lass, that ye took up to the big city and threatened to make a lady of?"

A voice, hushed and slow: "They—say—the—child—is—in—London."

The newcomer, flicking the ash from his cigarette, glowered at the last speaker and hissed: "As for you, Black Bart, alias Jasper Vinton, remember that one word from me would set all Scotland Yard on your trail!"

A new voice from the table: "Stand back, Hector Walsingham! I would rather be the poor working girl I am than the gilded toy your wealth would make me—and besides, you wear made ties! I'll have to speak to the stage manager about that," continued the speaker in less dramatic tones. "Look, it's one of those horrible made things that fasten at the back of his neck with a harness buckle—see his hand go up to it!" [114]

The newcomer emitted a mocking laugh, but judiciously sought a seat in the next room.

"Say—new idea for a melodrama," came another voice from the long table. "The old thing with an Ibsen twist. Stern father ready to drive erring daughter from his door in a snowstorm, but *it won't snow*! Of course he can't send her off in pleasant weather. It clouds up every few days, and the old man hopefully gets his speech ready—'Curse ye, ye are no longer a daughter of mine!' but the sun comes out again. Girl gets nervous. Young squire gets nervous, too, though he's married the girl in secret. He begs the old man to put her out and have it over with, even if the weather is pleasant. Old man won't hear of such a thing. Got to have a howling snowstorm. His mind fails; he sits in the chimney corner driveling about the horrible winters they used to have when you could curse a daughter out almost any day in the week. Everybody disgusted at the way things are dragging. Young people quarrel. Divorce! Young squire sails for Labrador to try it again, where you can count on the winters. Girl watches ship out of sight, and *it snows*! Snows hard. But too late—ah, God, too late! She rushes back home to find the old man delirious with joy. He starts in to do his speech at last, but she slowly strangles him with her muscular young hands. Rather good curtain, that—yes?" He looked around the table appealingly, but the others had [115] turned from him to another newcomer, a young man of dark and sinister aspect, whom they greeted as Simon Legree. Ewing heard Eliza's despairing cry, "Merciful Heavens, the river is choked with ice!" above the deep baying of bloodhounds that issued from half a dozen able throats. The newcomer was obliging enough to scowl and demand fiercely, "Tom, you black rascal, ain't you mine, body and soul?"

A fair-haired youth at the table, with the face of an overfed Cupid, responded pleadingly: "No—no, Massa! Mah body may b'long to yo' but mah soul to de good Lawd who made it!"

"Crack! Crack! Crack! Take that, you black hound, and that, and that!" Uncle Tom cringed under the blows of an imaginary lash, and Legree seated himself at the long table. A bearded man at the head promptly became little Eva, with a piping voice. "Uncle Tom, dear Uncle Tom, I fear I am going to die in the last act."

The faithful slave gulped at his claret and water and replied tearfully, "Dar, dar, Miss Eba, yo' bre'k dis pore ole man's heart!"

"And, dear Uncle Tom, remember that the colored quartet will slink in and sing 'Rock of Ages' while I am dying on a camp bed in the parlor. Think of that, you black hound!"

"Indeed, that is what I am apprehending, Miss St. Clair," returned Uncle Tom, this time in polished accents and with marked urbanity. "And you are doubtless aware that I shall have to be present and listen to it. Come, then, little one! If you must die, come with me into the back yard where the quartet can't find us, and I will feed you to the nice hungry bloodhounds. They've had [116] nothing since tea."

Ewing listened, aghast. He had once gone with Ben in Durango to see "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and both of them had wept at its heartrending crisis. It embarrassed him now to hear its pathos

blasphemed, embarrassed him because he felt a sort of shamed mirth. He was glad that Ben was not by.

Piersoll and his publisher still discussed literature. Layton was now setting forth the superior state of the latter-day author over those of the past.

"Those old fellows had no market—publishers were a sleepy lot. Think what could have been done with 'Paradise Lost,' illustrated by Hulston with about fifty half tones and marginal decorations, and an elegant binding, properly advertised with testimonials from clergymen and leading actresses and senators and prominent college presidents. I tell you, gentlemen," he concluded, earnestly, "this is the golden age of letters!"

This phrase unhappily reaching the big table in a moment of quiet, made an instant sensation.

"The golden age of letters!" was echoed in concert by eight men who arose solemnly and bowed to the embarrassed Layton. He tried to smile tolerantly, as if he knew a joke when he saw one. They sat down and turned to stare at him with extravagant awe, catching his eye when they could and drinking to the golden age. Piersoll grinned cheerfully at them. Ewing was puzzled.

"I like this place for its literary atmosphere," said one loudly, gazing over the head of Layton. "Don't you all just love literature?" "Oh, I simply adore it!" answered the next man. "I really can't say what I should do without books. I think they improve the mind." [117]

Now they hitched their chairs about so that they could regard Layton more easily, though they affected to be unconscious of his presence.

"It *does* seem to me that literature is good to read," ventured another conservatively, "but then, *I* love music and flowers and the little birds."

"I should die without literature," insisted another—"it's so good and excellent. Oh, why do not more people read literature and be decent!"

"Now you take Henry James," began another, judicially, "he's a bright writer, but he can't touch the great throbbing heart of the public like Hall Caine can."

"What *is* a Hall Caine can?" demanded the whiskered person bluntly. "I thought they kept 'em in jars."

Layton rose, genially bidding his host and Ewing good night. The men at the long table rose with him, bowed ceremoniously, and chanted "the golden age of letters" as he passed—all but one, who sobbed bitterly because poor Shakespeare had not lived to see it.

Ewing was still dazed, but he had slowly been growing cheerful. He felt that he could almost understand this strange fooling. He would have been glad to observe it still from a distance, but Piersoll took him to the long table when Layton had gone. The others made room for them, and Ewing responded somewhat timidly to the introductions that Piersoll performed. He was a little anxious lest he be made a part or target of their sport and show himself awkward under the ordeal. For the moment, however, there were remarks about the undesirability of "tradesmen" as guests of the club.

"I know a lovely delicatessen merchant," said one brightly, "a most interesting person. He says this is the golden age of cooked provisions. I must have him round the next time Layton is brought in." [118]

"I can get a plumber from over on Eighth Avenue," volunteered another. "We might have a 'trade' night, if Layton will come. Of course they'll talk about nothing but how to sell their wares, but they'll have a good time together."

Presently they forsook this theme, and Ewing found himself talking to Chalmers, an illustrator with whose work he had long been familiar. Though Chalmers drew Western subjects, Ewing was amazed at his confession that he had never been west of Jersey City. Chalmers, on the other hand, was delighted to learn that Ewing had so long been a part of that life which he had portrayed from afar, and was at once profuse with offers of help when Ewing explained his situation. He was eager to see his work, and would install him in a studio.

"I know the place for you," he exclaimed, after a moment's reflection. "There's a vacant studio in our building on Forty-second Street. Billy Glynn told me to sublet it and sell the stuff the first chance I had. You can move in right off if you like it."

Ewing thanked him warmly. It was pleasant to find that the recent Simon Legree had his human side. Two of the other men at the table had studios in the same building: Crandall, who made pictures for a comic weekly, and Baldwin, who was a magazine illustrator. They became, like Chalmers, solicitous to oblige the newcomer, and were attentive to Piersoll when he praised, with a quick word or two, the drawings of Ewing. He felt immensely drawn to these men who had dropped their bantering to be kind to him.

The crowd of diners had thinned out until only a few lingered over their coffee. From one or another of these scattered groups would come a burst of laughter at the climax of a story, or a bar of song from one who had reached his playtime of the day, and recked not if he advertised this. It was an hour of ease in the Monastery, when its inmates expanded in the knowledge that Sunday lay before them. To some, at least, this could be a day of rest. [119]

A musical member came from the rear room to the piano near the long table to play a Liszt rhapsody. When this performer had gone back to his seat one of the men from the big table—he who had lately enacted Little Eva, and whose title of "The Brushwood Boy" Ewing at once related to his beard—seated himself at the instrument.

"Heard a great song over on Third Avenue last night," he began. "Wish I could remember—something like this—" His fingers searched for the melody. Ewing caught a transient strain of it and thrilled to recognize Ben's favorite, a thing he might be singing to his guitar in the far-off lonely cabin at that very moment.

"'The Fatal Wedding,'" he ventured to the performer.

"Sure—that's it! 'The Fatal Wedding.' Wish you fellows could have heard it—rich! How did it go, now?"

Ewing recklessly hummed the opening bars.

"Go ahead, if you know it!" This came from several of the men. He protested. He would have liked to sing it, yet feared to do so before an audience whose ridicule he had learned to dread. He considered the song to be irreproachable and could understand the apparent enthusiasm about [120] it, but he doubted his worth as a vocalist.

"I don't believe I'd better try it," he began; "I know the words—it's the favorite song of an old-time cowboy I've lived with, and he does it right. I couldn't give anything more than a poor imitation of him."

The inciting calls were renewed.

"Go on! Do your worst! Show us how your friend does it! Silence in the back of the hall!"

Piersoll smiled encouragingly and the accompanist struck the opening chords, having at last recalled the air. Ewing diffidently took his place at the end of the piano, with apologetic protests. "I'll do my best, but you should hear Ben Crider sing this."

The little audience listened with unfeigned delight as he sang of the handsome stranger who wooed the village beauty, only to desert her for "a lady proud and haughty" who had "houses, jewels, land, and gold at her command." The words moved his hearers. Had he not promised them to render the song in his friend's manner? They felt he was achieving this with rare art. Almost unconsciously, indeed, he sang the song in Ben's best manner, with a sob in the voice and even with Ben's strained, sad face as he reached the pitiful climax:

"While they were honeymooning in a mansion on the
hill,
Kind friends were laying Nellie out behind the mill."

He moved quickly back to his chair almost before the first shouts of laughter dismayed him. He blushed and glanced appealingly from face to face as the applause was swelled by the groups in the rear room. He and Ben had considered this no song to be laughed at. It was too sad. Yet he saw that the applause was a friendly tribute to his performance. Piersoll was pounding him [121] joyously between the shoulders and Chalmers was urging him to do Ben Crider singing the "Fatal Wedding" at their next club smoker. Baldwin demanded the last verse again, and Ewing sang it, from his chair this time, redoubling his efforts to bring out its pathos.

In the new applause that deafened him he felt reassured. At least they were not laughing at *him*. He joined weakly in the merriment. The gods had blessed him with a gift for silence at critical moments. He asked no questions.

As the mirth subsided voices were heard unctuously rehearsing choice lines from the song. A passion for the ballad pathetic had been aroused. Some one called on Chalmers.

"Chalmers has written a song himself—give it to us, Chalmers—the one you sang up at Needham's the other night." Chalmers took his place and bowed low as the accompanist poised eager hands above the key-board.

"Gentlemen, with your kind attention, I'll give you a little thing called 'Nothing but Mother'—words and music by a party that doesn't want his real name known because the folks back home might hear of it. Let her go, Professor!"

In a twangy, nasal voice, not unlike Ben's, enunciating his words with the fastidious and strained precision of the music-hall balladist, he began:

"The courtroom, it was crowded,
All the witnesses was there;
The Judge he sat a-frowning
In his highly cushioned chair. [122]
They was trying a old lady
For the stealing of a horse;
They had hauled her to the station,
They had dragged her there by force!"

The last line had been achieved with intense, passionate emphasis. Ewing, listening intently,

felt the pricking of a nameless suspicion. The song seemed right enough, and yet some queer, ulterior emotion stirred within him. The air continued in a stirring minor, adapted to the dramatic action:

"Then uprose a handsome lawyer,
But would not give his name;
He defended this old lady
And well he done the same.
The verdict was "Not guilty!"
Tears stood in the jury's eyes;
When the unknown lawyer heard it,
Then says he to their surprise:"

With secret consternation Ewing waited, trying to laugh with the others, who had exploded at "*tears*," wrenched out in a high minor wail. The air now took a graceful swinging waltz movement, and the puzzled youth suffered an illumining flash:

"She was my mother once
In days of long ago;
I'll not forsake her now,
Her lots has fell so low.
I have other mothers now
To take me by the hand,
But I'll not desert this one
Just because I'm rich and grand."

Enlightened at last, Ewing joined in the applause, amid which Chalmers resumed his seat. Instantly perceiving why they had laughed at his own song, he burned at recalling how chance [123] alone had saved him from betraying a simple-hearted faith in the virtues of that gem. Now it was funny, even to him. Other songs of Ben's rang in his ears; they were *all* funny—though he must never let Ben know that. He had unwittingly betrayed Ben to a ribald crew, but he had learned a thing it was well to know. He had learned of the world; he had aged in a leap.

They sat late at table, drinking beer from stone mugs, smoking long-stemmed pipes and trifling with song. They blended their voices in melting harmony at the climax of "Nelly's" woe and in the acuter parts of "Nothing but Mother."

As they drifted out at midnight Chalmers made an appointment with Ewing to inspect the vacant studio and make himself, if he liked, one of the colony of not too serious workers housed by the Rookery.

Half a dozen men strolled with him to the Stuyvesant, and in the shadow of its sober doors, as a parting testimonial to his worth, they sang once more in blended pathos:

"She was my moth-e-r-r once
In days so long a-g-o-o-o!"

He watched them up the street a block, pouring out their hearts in song to a watchful and cynical policeman.

CHAPTER XII [124]

THE NEW MEMBER

WHEN Ewing, a few days later, moved into the vacant studio on the top floor of the Rookery, the men there made an affair of it, flocking from their studios to receive him. They showed him the view from his windows, a far stretch of dull-red roofs, with murky water butts stuck aloft like giant cockades against the gray sky. They showed him where he would sleep, in a little closet-like alcove screened from the big room by a gay curtain. They exhibited the alcohol lamp left by Glynn, over which water would be boiled for the morning coffee. And they superintended, from their wider experience, the arrangement of his belongings.

He felt aloof from the friendly turmoil, unable to believe that the place would be his own. The thing was too vast for his experience. It would surely be for another that Baldwin spread the Navajo blankets on the floor and couch; for some one else that Chalmers, of the beard—him they called the Brushwood Boy or eke "the human ambush"—removed piles of old magazines from the cot in the alcove; for some one else that Dallas tucked brushes into a ginger jar; and for some one else that Griggs tested water taps and the radiator.

When they had cheerfully discovered that no one could think of anything further to do they

trooped down Broadway to celebrate Ewing's advent in a dinner at the Monastery. When this was over and the crowd had thinned to a few late sitters they had him do a picture. The others watched him as he worked, standing on a bare table drawn to the wall. Brother Hilarius grew before their eyes, insecurely astride a bucking broncho, narrowly observed by two figures in the background—a dismayed brother of his order in gown of frieze and hempen girdle, and Red Phinney, contorting himself in ribald glee. [125]

The watchers applauded as the picture grew. They had not supposed that the quiet, almost timid, boy, who betrayed his unsophistication by countless little mannerisms, could have attained the sureness of line his strokes revealed.

The heated air of the room rushed up to make a torrid zone of the region about the worker's head, and from time to time one of the watchers handed him a mug of creaming ale with which he washed the dust of the charcoal from his throat. He lost himself in the work at last. The voices, laughter, songs, strains of the piano, came but faintly to him, and were as the echoes of street life that sounded in his ears each night before he slept. It was after one o'clock when he stepped down from the table to survey the finished drawing.

He knew he had done well, but he was glad to be told so by others. It was clearly their opinion that the club had in no way descended from its high standards of mural decoration. Baldwin brought a bottle of fixative and sprayed the drawing through a blowpipe. Then they drained a final bumper to the artist and the work and went out into the mild September night, making the empty street, sleeping in shadow, resound to their noisy talk.

The light of a car crept ghostlike toward them and they stood to board it. As it moved on through Broadway Ewing thought of an empty creek bed at the bottom of some ravine at home. This was the dry time, but with earliest dawn would come the freshet, flooding the cañon, surging over its rocky bed to some outlet as mysterious as its source. The image brought him a sudden pang of homesickness. Despite the jovial friendliness of the crowd he was still a detached spectator. There was no intimacy for him, no real contact. He was glad to remember the bed that awaited him and confessed this to Chalmers. [126]

"Bed!" echoed Chalmers in righteous amazement. "What's the use of going to bed? You only fall asleep!"

"He's right, old man," put in Baldwin warningly. "I've tried it."

Dallas turned a reproachful gaze on Ewing. "God has given you a beautiful life and you sleep it away! Come, come, man!"

"We'll have a bite to eat, anyway," broke in Griggs. "Come on, here's Clayton's."

They were presently about a table far back in a restaurant where lingered many sitters-up of nights. They ordered Welsh rabbits and ale. Ewing refused the ale and drank water.

Dallas put on an air of wishing to defend this choice of beverage. "Of course, it's the stuff that made Noah famous," he submitted.

"Yes—and it made all that trouble at Johnstown, too," broke in Chalmers with deep hostility in his look at Ewing's glass. "I can't forget that. Water has never been the same to me since."

They fell to the food when it came. They smoked, they drank more ale, they sang in tones enough subdued to avert public disfavor, and they flung jests about to spice the endless gossip of their craft. [127]

Ewing listened, yet with eager eyes for the people at other tables about them. These men and women captivated him by their suggestions of mystery—characters in the play he was forever beholding—curious-looking men whose faces suggested lives of dramatic tension; beautiful women, splendidly arrayed, with much of mystery and something of daring in their animation. He scanned them all furtively as the talk at his own table flowed on.

It was chiefly of their work that they talked. Chalmers related matters exposing the inefficiency of an art editor to whose mercies fate now and then betrayed him. Chalmers bitterly thought that this person should be driving an ice wagon or helping about in a shipyard, or something of the sort—not telling artists how to draw their pictures.

Baldwin sympathized. He had his own art editor. It came out that no man present had ever even heard of a competent art editor. It stood to reason that there could be none. A man of capacity to be an art editor would have too much self-respect. He would starve in the gutter first. But it took time and talk and replenished mugs to reduce this truth to its beautiful, naked simplicity, and Ewing at last saw that day had come. The lights inside were paling to an unwholesome yellow. He mentioned the circumstance insinuatingly, for he was tired.

Baldwin scowled at his watch, then dropped it into his fresh mug of ale, and glanced triumphantly about the table.

"A degenerate race," muttered Chalmers. "At the first sign of daylight we scamper off to bed like scared rabbits. For me—thank God—there's nothing like the glorious sunrise, the crisp air, the healthy glow. There's magic in it—Nature's choicest gift. Yes, sir, the splendors of dawn for me! D'you s'pose I'd miss *this*?" He glared about the room and ecstatically sniffed the thick, smoky air. "What does that clod know of beauty?" He indicated a waiter, dozing against the wall [128]

with practiced equilibrium.

"Well, well," exclaimed Baldwin, "if I haven't gone and forgotten to eat breakfast! How shiftless!" He aroused the waiter with snapping fingers. "I hope we're not keeping you up, Claude, but bacon and eggs, please, and coffee."

An hour later they went out to find the street already alive with early workers. Baldwin appeared to consider that these, also, were night-long revelers.

"'Stonishing how they can keep it up, night after night," he remarked, frowning in wonder at the early procession. "You'd think they'd *have* to sleep some time."

"It'll tell on their nerves sooner or later, you mark my words," said Griggs sententiously.

Chalmers stared intently into the window of a florist adjoining the restaurant. He turned to them with purpose in his fair face and spoke again of his art editor.

"Only trouble with him—he's passed away, poor fellow, and doesn't know it. He ought to be told—but not brutally. I see something here for him."

He came out of the florist's presently with a sizable emblem of mortality—a floral pillow with "Rest" worked on it in immortelles.

"Come on!" [129]

At the corner they crowded into hansoms. It was a long ride, and Ewing was asleep when they reached Park Row, but they aroused him to help escort Chalmers and his offering to the elevator of a mighty building. While they awaited his return Baldwin bethought him of his own art editor. He seemed to believe that something fitting might be done. After deep reflection he crossed the narrow street to a district messenger office, to emerge a moment later followed by eight grinning messenger boys. These he led to the elevator of another building near by.

Chalmers returned from his own mission, wiping his eyes.

"Poor fellow, he knows he's dead now. But I broke down and sobbed like a child when I gave it to him—I'm all heart. It's over now, all but the life insurance. And yet he didn't thank me. On the contrary he spoke language I should blush to repeat."

The others put on looks of chastened gloom and were speaking in hushed tones of the sad event when Baldwin returned. He dismissed his uniformed attendants with largesse.

"Thing that needed to be done for his own good," he explained. "Max believes he's an art editor, but nobody else does—nobody else ever believed it in this whole wide, beautiful world. So I lined those trusting little boys up in front of his door and said, 'Boys, look in there and you will see a real art editor.' They looked in at old Max and then at me. 'You believe it, don't you, boys?' I asked them, and they all said, 'Yes, sir!' So I made them bow to him and say in concert, 'We *do* believe you are an art editor, no matter what other people say,' and then we left. We had to. I'm [130] ashamed to tell you—but old Max seemed to forget that he was a gentleman. He'll thank me when he comes to his senses, all the same. He can lay his head on his pillow to-night knowing that there are others in the world besides himself who believe he's an art editor. Oh, I love to do good!" he concluded with a benevolent smirk.

Once more they were in the hansoms and Ewing slept again, to the strains of "I have other mothers now," sung by Baldwin, who sat in his lap.

As they climbed the stairs of the Rookery Baldwin found the moment suited for sage counsel to Chalmers.

"'T won't do, my boy—'t won't do! Can't burn candles both ends. Your face this minute looks like one of those cheap apple pies in a restaurant window."

Ewing mounted to his own floor and found himself in the curious stillness of the big room. It had seemed to wait there for him, mutely, but with desire. He stood a moment in the silence, his ears ringing with after sounds of the night. He fell on the couch, too tired to go formally to bed, and felt himself falling into sleep as into a beneficent and welcoming abyss.

CHAPTER XIII [131]

SEARCHING THE WILDERNESS

HE awoke from a dream noisy with laughter and the ring of shod hoofs on a stone roadway; a phantasma in which faces were gray and distorted through smoke and people did wild things in sane ways. He lay long enough to separate the fiction of this dream from the actual

but not more credible performances of the night before. Then he rose, yawning away the last of his drowsiness, and looked out over the roofs. He saw that it was late afternoon, for the shadows of the water butts ran well to the east. The mute solitude of the scene gave his loneliness a new pang. He felt more solitary in the multitude than he had ever felt in his unpeopled hills. Yet the place still lured him, not less than in days when he had hungered for it, a starved lover of life in the desert. If only he could find some one to come near, some one to whom he could be his unguarded self. Such a one must exist.

His eyes swept the reticent roofs, and his mind searched beneath them: what felicitous possibilities did they not conceal? People doubtless fasting like himself, longing for the friendly cry, eating their hearts out in loneliness—men and women he might know or never know. He lifted each roof as he gazed; under any one of them might be the companion; under all were charms of adventurous search.

In this moment of homesick longing his mind caught at Mrs. Laithe. She had told him to come [132] soon. Did that mean in one day, or in ten? She was his one link with an old life that had filled if it did not satisfy. And sometimes she had met him. Chiefly she had been a woman for the eyes, but there had been fleeting times when they touched in ways that brought him a deeper satisfaction —times when invisible antennæ from each seemed to be in communicative contact. These moments brought back the palsy of shyness that had stricken him at his first glimpses of her; yet they brought, too, some potent, strange essence that sustained him. He resolved to go to her now. She mystified, she dismayed him, but her kindness was dependable.

It was the memory of this that moved him to throw off his stale, smoke-saturated garments, to bathe, to dress himself afresh, and to walk briskly through the tonic sharpness of a September afternoon.

As he rang the bell a vague, delightful home-coming warmth rushed over him.

"In a moment I shall see her," he said within himself. As the door swung back he heard the din of many voices and caught a rush of heated air, sweetish with the odor, as it seemed, of tired and fainting flowers. At the entrance to the drawing room he faltered, for the place was thronged with terrifying strange people who held teacups and talked explosively.

Longing to flee, he saw Mrs. Laithe across the room, turning somewhat wearily, he thought, away from three or four voluble women, as if to snatch at a moment of rest from her perfunctory smile. Almost instantly her eyes swung to his, and he became aware, as she started toward him, of some sudden flurry leaping behind their black-fringed curtains, a quick play of lights that [133] stirred and confused him. She gave him her hand with half-formal phrases of greeting under which he detected a rising nervousness.

"So good of you to come, and on my day! They're tiresome at best. You are well? You shall have tea and know some people." She went to a table between the two rooms, where a girl in white drew tea from a samovar into many little cups. Ewing began to watch this girl, a slight but rounded creature with yellowish hair curving down either side of her tanned face. He caught a greenish light in her eyes, as she bent to her task with a somewhat anxious concentration.

Mrs. Laithe brought him the tea, which he helplessly took, and presented him to a vivid-hued young matron, who made room for him beside her. His part in the talk that followed was confined to mutterings of agreement, tinged now and then with a discreet sympathy. He heard the latest golf and yachting news and sprightly chat of the lady's newest motor car. He caught a blurred view of the Austrian Tyrol, and absorbed technical data on the operation of smuggling silk stockings from Paris. He gleaned that Airedales were difficult to raise; that Caruso would return; that all coachmen were but hirelings of the sales stables, when you got at the root of the trouble. He learned that Newport had been deadly, Bar Harbor impossible, Tuxedo not half bad for a week end; and that New York would be empty for another fortnight.

Upon none of these difficult matters had he anything of moment to offer. The assertion that New York was empty bereft him, indeed, of even his slender power of assent. The lady would have considered him stupid but for the look with which he met her quick eyes from time to time. [134] She decided that he was merely bored—a thing not to be particularly remarked. It was common enough in the men she met.

In one of the roving looks he permitted himself under his companion's discourse his glance rested on two people far back in the library. One was Mrs. Laithe's father. He stood, cup in hand, talking down to a smartly attired, whitehaired woman who sat forward in her chair and stared at Ewing. Her gown was black, and one white-gloved hand rested on Bartell's arm. Her eyes did not waver as Ewing met them. He saw that Bartell seemed to identify him in the throng and speak a few words to the lady. Ewing turned to his companion, discomfort under that steady survey. A moment later he was drawn to look again and saw Bartell coming toward him.

"Ah, young man!" His greeting oozed cordiality, the soothing friendliness of a man fitted to find only the pleasantness of life.

"And come with me, if Mrs. Dudley will let you off—" the lady smiled a pretty but unreserved assent—"an old friend, Mrs. Lowndes, wants to know you. She's a dear soul, always jolly. Tell her about cowboys and things, won't you—something pleasant."

They stood before the woman in the chair, and Bartell uttered a few words which Ewing did not

hear, for at the moment he had glanced up to see Mrs. Laithe watching him with eyes of such genuine dismay that confusion overtook him. He wondered what wrong thing he could have done, but recovered in time to bow and murmur a phrase of acknowledgment. His new acquaintance indicated a seat beside her, but did not look at him.

"Thank you, Chris. Mr. Ewing will entertain me. Run off to someone as young as yourself." [135]

Bartell smiled himself back into the more crowded room, and Ewing waited, apprehending talk like that he had lately undergone. But he found that this woman who had stared at him so curiously was not voluble. For a long time she remained silent. Once he glanced up to observe that her eyes were closed, and seized the moment to study her face. He thought she was very old —sixty at least. Yet the face showed strength in its frailness. The cheeks, looking brown under the plenteous white hair, were lined but not withered, and the curve from brow to chin revealed more than a suggestion of self-will. A dainty but imperious old lady he thought her. He might have believed himself forgotten but for an intimation of waiting thrown out by her manner, a suggestion of leaning toward him, breathless, one of the gloved hands poising as if to alight on his arm. He found this less tiring than the compulsion he had lately been under to agree with a livelier woman about matters strange to him. And yet he was relieved when she opened her eyes as if to speak. He regarded her with puzzled but kind expectancy. At last she said, and he understood that her voice was unnaturally tight and hard:

"Mr. Bartell tells me that you are a painter, Mr. Ewing."

"I'm trying to be—they are very kind here."

"Your father was Gilbert Ewing—a painter?"

"Oh, you *knew* him?" He thrilled at the thought, but was disappointed.

"Mr. Bartell mentioned his name—and yours."

"He was a painter, yes; he died out there in Colorado."

She seemed to shudder ever so slightly and her eyes closed again. [136]

"And your—your mother?" The words were hardly more than a whisper.

"My mother died when I was very small."

Again she seemed to wince under a sting. But now she fell away from that waiting tenseness with which she had held him. The hand that had hovered over his arm fell limply into her lap, and she leaned back in her chair.

"I'm afraid you aren't very well," he ventured. "The rooms are close."

She opened her eyes, with no sign of having heard. Sitting forward in her chair she gazed ahead with narrowed eyes.

"I am an old woman and dull, Mr. Ewing, but I should like to have you come and see me."

"I'll be glad to come," he answered promptly enough, though he could not keep surprise from his voice.

"Come to-morrow, if you will, and pardon an old woman's whim in asking you with so little ceremony."

"I will come, of course." He wondered if she felt a city loneliness like his own.

"Thank you. I shall be in after four." She gave him a card from a small silver case at her belt. "The room *is* close. You may fetch me tea."

He was certain her eyes were sharply on him as he went, and when he returned, her full gaze swept him with a look in which he curiously read incredulity, with something beside that might have been fear or repulsion—he could not determine. She took the tea, but set it down untasted. A very queer old lady he thought her. He stood by in embarrassment, not knowing what to say. [137] Glancing about for inspiration he was relieved to see Bartell bearing down upon him from the side of Mrs. Laithe. He came up jovially.

"I've been ordered to separate you two, Kitty. Young men aren't plentiful at this time, and Eleanor wants one."

"Thank you for bringing him, Chris." She gave Ewing a little nod, which he construed as his release, and he turned to meet Mrs. Laithe.

She sought his eyes with that swift look of apprehension which had before puzzled him, and threw another glance toward Mrs. Lowndes, who now chatted smilingly with Bartell. She seemed to be reassured.

"I do hope you've not been bored. No? I was afraid. Come and meet my sister," and she momentarily swept away his memories of the queer old lady by leading him to the girl in white who poured tea.

"Virgie, this is Mr. Ewing."

The girl looked up with that hint of shyness he had before observed in her. The eyes instantly recalled his own mountain lake when the light showed it to far, green depths. But they fell at once, for she inclined her head toward him, seized a cup and demanded sternly, "Cream or lemon —I mean I'm very glad to know you. Do you take sugar?"

In his own embarrassment he would have told her, but Mrs. Laithe broke in with her low laugh.

"He doesn't want tea, child, he only wants——"

The girl interrupted defensively, with a flutter of eyelids toward Ewing: "I can't remember *what* they like when they come back the second time. It's too much to expect."

"Your martyrdom is over, dear. No one wants more tea, and most of them are escaping. Talk to [138] Mr. Ewing while I speed them."

The girl sank wearily into a chair, with a rueful glance at the table's disarray of cups and plates.

"I'll dream about tea to-night." Her hands met disconsolately in her lap.

"I suppose there was a lot of it," Ewing replied sympathetically.

"Why do they do so many insane things here?" demanded the girl. "They're always at something. Town is tiresome."

"But don't you live here?"

"Dear no! I went to live with mamma's sister up in New Hampshire when I was small, after mamma died. There was no one here to raise me. And now that I'm raised they want me back, but I shy at things so—dad says I'm not city broke. I shall hold off another year before I get into this sort of thing—" She waved an ably disparaging hand toward the backs of several unsuspecting people who lingered. Then she looked up to meet his laugh and laughed prettily with him. The two had found common ground by some freemasonry of the shy.

"Does it seem like a play to you, too?" he asked; "everyone playing a part and making you wonder how it's coming out?"

"Well"—she debated—"I used to have that, when I was at school and came here for holiday times. I was always expecting great things to happen then. But they never did. You'll be disappointed if you expect them. Everybody rides down Broadway in the morning and back again at night, and they make such a fuss about it that you think something worth while is coming off, [139] but it doesn't. *I* know." She achieved this with an air of mellowed cynicism that almost won his respect.

"But things *must* happen where there's so much life," he insisted.

"You're very young, aren't you?" she retorted. "Quite a boy, I should think. Sister said so. You'll see, though. It isn't one bit more a happening life than ours up at Kensington. Yours must have been the happening life, there in the West. Tell me about Clarence. Is he a real cowboy yet? He says he's a real one, but I couldn't believe it. Those I saw in the Wild West show looked as if they'd had to study it a long time. Can Clarence lasso a wild cow yet?" She leaned toward him with friendly curiosity. They were amazed half an hour later when they looked up to find Mrs. Laithe standing by them, the only other occupant of the room.

"You must come oftener," urged Mrs. Laithe. Her sister gave him her hand with a grip that made him wonder at its force.

He pushed through the evening crowd of Broadway, pleasantly reviewing his talk with the girl. At Forty-second Street it occurred to him that this was the first time he had walked the street unconscious of its throng. He had been self-occupied, like most of its members.

But the girl, he reflected, would go away. The friend, the near one, to take and give, man or woman, was still to be found.

CHAPTER XIV [140]

THE TRICK OF COLOR

THE men of the Rookery toiled, in the season of toil, with that blithe singleness of purpose they brought to their play. Ewing learned this the following morning when, after an hour in his own place, correcting some of those hasty first arrangements, he began an idling tour of the other studios. These occupied the two upper floors of the building, those beneath flaunting signs of trade on the ground-glass doors one passed in the long climb from the street.

From Baldwin's studio—Baldwin was sketching in from the model a kneeling Filipino prisoner with head thrown back and hands bound behind him—Ewing descended to Chalmers's place to find its owner finishing, with many swift pen strokes, the filmy gown of a débutante who underwent with downcast eyes the appraisal of an elderly beau. This absorbed and serious Chalmers was so unlike the frivolous night bird who reviled his art editor that Ewing forbore to distract him.

Griggs, in the studio back of Chalmers, was soberly work-bent over the wash-drawing of a sword fight, an illustration for what he confided to Ewing was the latest "high boots and hardware novel."

"One lovely thing," explained the artist, "they all take the same pictures—the plighted troth in the château garden; the lone hero spitting eight low-browed mercenaries of the scoundrelly duke [141] at the end of the blind passage; 'nother fight on the main stairway of the palace, girl in view back of the hero, who's still acting the village cut-up with his little rapier; and the last picture, reward of hero in front parlor of the château, my Lord the Cardinal standing by to bless the happy pair, and the wicked Duke Bazazas being dragged out by loyal serving men to be finished off in the woodshed. The caption for that one always is, 'At Last, My Darling!' I just glance along the proofs until I light on those scenes. It saves a lot of reading, and I think of getting a set of rubber stamps to do the pictures with."

"You seem to be all black-and-white men here," remarked Ewing. "Aren't any of you painters? I've thought I'd like to work in color—to learn the trick of it."

Griggs glanced up at him, then smiled largely.

"The trick of color, eh? Sure! There's a boy upstairs next door to you—old Pop Sydenham. I'll take you up now, but don't let him hear you call it 'the trick of color.' Pop has been at that trick for over a century now—I believe he's a hundred and nineteen years old to-morrow. He's got a darned refined sense of color, too. I guess he's seen every color in the world, except some of those he puts on his own canvases. Some of those I don't believe he ever saw anywhere else. But Pop's worth knowing if you're keen to paint. He's a whole Art Students' League in himself. Come on, he'll be proud to have you notice him."

Wiping his hands neatly on his jacket—plainly a long-established custom with him—Griggs led the way to a room across the hall from Ewing's. He opened the door in answer to a call and pushed Ewing in before him. Sydenham leaned back on his stool to peer at them around the [142] corner of his easel.

He was an old man, as Griggs had said. White hair fell in sparse locks over his ears, and his short, roughly pointed beard was scant enough to reveal sunken cheeks. But the face was tanned to a wholesome brown, and the eyes that glanced over his gold-rimmed spectacles were full of fresh good-humor. He nodded to Griggs and clambered down from his stool to greet Ewing.

"He's a line man now," announced Griggs after the introduction, "but some busybody has gone and told him that there's such a thing as real color. Of course I don't pretend to know myself, but I told him you did. He's your neighbor on this floor. Run in often and make yourselves at home with each other," he concluded cordially. "I must hurry back and finish a fight."

"May I look?" asked Ewing, his eyes running about the room to the many canvases.

"My summer's work is there—Look? yes; but I can't promise what you'll see. You bring your own eyes. I can't make eyes, too. If I only could—" He spoke with a slow, soft gentleness, his blue eyes half shut and dreamily distant. As Ewing turned to study a landscape leaning against the wall on a table near by, the painter climbed to his stool and twined his thin legs confusingly among its supports. Then facing his canvas and working a brush into the color on his palette he continued:

"Line is a fact. Color is only a sensation. Anyone can prove line, but to know color you must have imagination. If you lack that and do have a gift for humorous abuse you can be an art critic and make quite a bit of money, I'm told." He had begun to paint as he talked. He spoke with the [143] same slow gentleness, even when a hint of seasoned bitterness betrayed itself.

One close look at the sketches about him had made Ewing rejoice that his own paintings were safe with Ben Crider. He studied the canvases before him with pleasure and dismay: wooded hills, grassy meadows, a park slope with a single birch; mist rising over a marsh; a country road narrowing into a blaze of sumach. They showed plainly enough, he thought, that color must be conveyed rather by implication than by blunt directness, and there, he felt, had been his own great blunder. He had been brutally direct.

Some of the pictures before him left him wanting a sharper definition of line, a more explicit modeling of surface, a treatment less timid, and the color itself, though it never failed to interest him, often puzzled or even irritated. He sought for words to disclose what he felt, his admiration for some of the sketches, his doubt or his rank disbelief as to others. But the old man suddenly swept the half-formed sentences from his mind.

A crash of falling furniture had resounded from the room of Dallas, forward on their own floor. From the studios below came other crashes, the noise of falling bodies, and a ringing, metallic clangor. Sydenham had paused at the first crash, then skipped nimbly from his stool, shouting gleefully, "There goes Griggs's suit of armor!" Then, to Ewing's amazement, he twitched the end

of a cord that led to a high mahogany sideboard, causing a cigar box, a copper kettle, and a heavy volume of prints to fall with resoundings that must have carried to the farthest studio. The old man faced him with the ecstatically deafened look of a child amid exploding firecrackers. [144] Then, as he discerned Ewing's startled look, he explained:

"It's only a way the boys have every day at one o'clock. That Baldwin boy started it by upsetting a musket and a brace of cavalry sabers. Then Griggs followed with his armor. Then they all got to joining in. The Chalmers boy pulls over his easel, and I understand there's been a complaint from the people below; but it leaves us feeling rather friendly, you know, and we're sure it's time to eat." He looked at Ewing as if seeking to justify his complicity in so childish a performance. And Ewing, reading the look, helped him to reload his sideboard for the next day's disturbance. The copper kettle, book and cigar box—the latter containing half a dozen lumps of coal—were replaced on a thin board to which the string was attached.

Sydenham had meantime taken food from a curtained cabinet and was munching before his easel. He waved the freedom of his larder to Ewing. "There's bread and half a chicken, and pickles. There used to be ham, but I forget if it's there yet. Anyway, it wasn't the most expensive ham. I can't lose daylight by running out. The light changes while I eat. I'm no Joshua. What did Griggs say of you—crazy boy, that Griggs. Doing black and white, eh? Show me."

Ewing had helped himself to the bread and meat, and the two, eating casually, crossed the hall to his own room. His drawings were at hand and Sydenham looked at them as he munched, pausing critically now and then, a bit of bread midway to his mouth.

"Not bad, not bad! If you can do that well you ought to do better. But too many of you boys quit [145] when you've learned to do something you can sell. It's respectable, of course, but shoemakers do as much, and you've no right to call yourselves artists for it. I'm afraid there isn't anything made in the world that some one won't buy. And people *know* if their boots fit them, or if their bread is good, but they buy pictures in the dark. There wouldn't be so many men calling themselves painters if the public wasn't a better judge of sawed lumber or iron castings than it is of pictures. Where did you study?"

"My father taught me drawing. He warned me to learn that first."

"Father, eh? Well—" His eyes rose from the drawings, ranged along the top of the couch, to the portrait of Ewing's mother, hung between the two windows, and the speech died on his lips. He stepped back, bit into a reserve slice of bread and waved an inquiring chicken bone toward the picture.

"My mother," explained Ewing. "My father painted it."

Sydenham's jaw fell, and looking again at the portrait he muttered some low, swift phrase of bewilderment. Ewing waited for him to speak, but the old man only stared.

"It has good color, don't you think?" he ventured at last, but even the mention of color could not move Sydenham to speech. He absently consumed the remainder of his food and flicked crumbs from his frayed jacket.

"You look like her," he said at last, with so much the air of speaking to himself that Ewing made no answer. He moved toward the door with bowed head. At the threshold he looked back at Ewing a brief moment, then went out, closing the door softly behind him. [146]

Ewing decided that his neighbor was a curious old man. Recalling other curious people he had met in this strange new world, he was reminded of the lady who had urged him to call on her. He was still ready to believe that anyone might wish to talk to him, or to hear him talk. But in spite of this, the old lady had been queer. From the table he picked up the card she had given him, studying the name and wondering what they might talk about.

He was still feeling this mild wonder when he rang the lady's bell at five o'clock.

CHAPTER XV [147]

FLESH OF HER FLESH

TWO persons had waited for Ewing. Mrs. Lowndes was one of them, sitting forward in her chair and braced on its arms, though her head dropped now and then in forgetfulness. The other was a big, shambling old man, a dark man gone gray, his face needing the kindly, yellowish-brown eyes to save it from sternness. His thickets of eyebrows were joined in a half-humorous scowl of perplexity.

"I had to send for you, Fred. You and Herbert Sydenham are the only two left who were close to me then, and Herbert Sydenham—well—" she laughed a laugh of exquisitely humorous pain

—"Herbert would have forgotten me any time these twenty years for a striking color scheme, a streak of unpaintable moonshine. It was you, Fred, or no one, and it hurt me so! All last night I was on the rocks being ground to bits. I knew you would say the wise thing."

The big man had risen to walk the floor, his thick shoulders heaving as if to throw off invisible burdens, his head shaking doggedly.

"Yes, Kitty, yes—" His voice was big but low, the voice of his whole being bent to soothe. He came to her side and reached down to take one of the frail, blue-veined hands between his own two, huge and hairy. They closed upon hers with a kind of awkward effectiveness.

"Of course you had to come to me, but I'm afraid all I can do is to brace you." [148]

"I wanted you to be with me. I couldn't have borne it alone, Fred—his being here—Kitty's child."

"And you say he doesn't know?"

"I'm certain of it, and Eleanor Laithe doesn't know; but those are little things when I know."

"We'll see, Kitty—we'll see. Perhaps I can help. But I suspect it's one of those matters where you must be your own guide. You'll act as you feel; not as I think—not even as you think."

"Ellen is going to the door," she whispered, almost fiercely, bracing herself in the chair.

As the maid held back the curtain at the doorway, Ewing advanced uncertainly, an embarrassed smile on his lips, the look of one who would be agreeable if he knew how. He saw Mrs. Lowndes stiffly fixed in her chair, her white-crowned head thrown back, and he would have taken her hand but she diverted him from this.

"Mr. Ewing, my old friend, Dr. Birley."

Her voice was no longer halting and shallow, as it had been the moment before when her barriers were down. Ewing swiftly confirmed his impression of the previous day: this was a lady of immeasurable pride, a one-time beauty who perhaps treasured the authority her charms had once conferred upon her, wielding it with little old-fashioned graces. She seemed to him at the moment to be an almost excessively mannered person, interesting, but unapproachable.

He stopped on his way to her chair and shook hands with the big man, who had come forward. This person was quite as formidable as the curious old lady, but he was eminently kind of look.

"Sit here, Mr. Ewing." He indicated a chair. [149]

"I asked you to come and see me—" The old lady had begun in low, even tones, but paused, and Ewing was again struck by this seeming of agitation which had made him remark her the day before.

"Mrs. Lowndes was interested to hear of your life in the West," said the big man easily, "and she was good enough to ask me to meet you also. We were both interested in knowing of you from the Bartells."

"There is so much we do not understand here in New York," put in Mrs. Lowndes, rather vaguely, Ewing thought. He looked from one to the other. The lady puzzled him, but the big man drew him from his embarrassment, helping him to an ease which he could hardly have achieved with his hostess alone.

Without knowing quite how he began he was presently talking. Unconsciously he directed his speech to the man, who kept kind eyes on him and led him by questions when he paused. He was aware that the woman listened and that her eyes searched his face, but he divined, without meeting them, that they were more curious than kind, and several times, as she moved in her chair, he seemed to feel sharp little points of hostility radiating toward him.

But the big man drew him more and more from the consciousness of her presence, so that he all but forgot her. It seemed entirely natural to him that he should be telling this friendly inquirer of his early life, the first memories of his father and mother, and of the queer, shifting home they had known. As he told of the death of his mother—both listeners had seemed strangely alert for that—he was startled by a sound from the lady—a catching of breath and a gasp of pain. He turned quickly, but observed only a stiffly courteous gesture bidding him continue. [150]

He stopped in confusion, feeling that a strange quiet had come upon the room. The questions from the big man had ceased, and the woman drooped in her chair until he could no longer distinguish her outline through the deepening dusk. Nor was there any sound when his own voice ceased. Neither figure stirred. He was oppressed by the awkwardness of it.

"I should have pulled up," he said, with an uneasy laugh. "I forgot I wasn't on a lone road."

There was still no sign from the woman, shrunk far into her chair, but the doctor rose at his speech with a half-muttered, "We're obliged to you." Ewing rose at the same time, with an impulse to break some strain that he felt himself sharing. The doctor reached out in the dusk and turned on an electric light that hung above the table, looking quickly at Mrs. Lowndes as he did so, for there had come from her a murmur of protest at the light. Ewing also looked at her from where he stood on the hearth rug. The lighting of the room had intensified some electrical

current that pulsed from each to each. The woman returned Ewing's gaze with the absorption of one moved beyond all arts of convention. Her eyes glistened, ominous of tears, and her small, lean chin trembled as her lips parted. Ewing turned from her distress, appealing by look to the big man, who watched them both, but his gaze was at once drawn back to the woman. She rose from her chair with weak effort and faced him with something like wild impulse rather than intention, a look, a waiting poise, that shook him with fear of the unknown.

Slowly she brought her hands to a wringing clasp at her breast. Her eyes were frankly wet now [151] as she leaned and peered at him, holding him immovable. Twice her lips parted with dry little gasps, her hands working as if to ring the words from her choked throat.

"My boy!" It was so low that without the look of her lips as they shaped the words he could not have been sure.

"My boy—oh, my boy!" This time they were sharper though no louder, and Ewing's nerves tingled an alarm that ran to the roots of his hair. She came a half step toward him, and he felt that he was drawing her, divined that in another moment she would be throwing herself upon him in surrender to some emotional torrent that raged within her. He was powerless under this sudden, strange assault. Dumbly he watched her, closer now by another step, the clasped hands, fighting blindly toward him, with little retreats to her breast, her dry lips again shaping the words, "My boy—my boy!"

And then, even as his own arms were half extended with an instinctive saving movement—for the woman seemed about to totter—the stillness was broken by quick steps along the hall, the rattle of curtain rings along a rod, and the voice of the maid:

"Mr. Teevan, ma'am!"

There had been an instinctive wrenching asunder of the three at the first sound of steps. Yet traces of the stress under which they had labored were still evident to Randall Teevan as he entered. Mrs. Lowndes had turned to search among the magazines on the table—not before the little man had swept her with a comprehending eye flash.

Ewing, pleasantly delivered from a situation that had grown irksome, a situation rising from what he considered the too-ready sympathy of an emotional old woman, allowed his relief full [152] play in the heartiness of his response to Teevan's greeting. The doctor had squared his shoulders to another pacing of the room.

Teevan, missing no item of the drama he had interrupted, chose for himself the rôle of blind unconsciousness. So well did he enact this that Mrs. Lowndes was convinced, and the belief aided her to recover a proper equanimity. The doctor surveyed the new actor with a skeptic keenness not so readily to be overcome.

One glance at Ewing's perturbed but mystified face assured Teevan that the climax of exposure had not been reached. He bustled amiably about the room, kissing the hand of Mrs. Lowndes, shaking the hand of the doctor, straightening a picture on the wall, and, at last, lighting a cigarette as he faced the room from his favorite post on the hearth rug.

"I ran in for a moment to see how my lady prospered," with a graceful wave of the expiring match toward Mrs. Lowndes, "and all is well. I find her holding court to youth and age, to wit and wisdom, all of which she combines graciously in her own person. She is looking weary, perhaps, but rejoiced. Gentlemen, you have served her well. Doubtless our young friend here, Mr.—Ah, yes, Mr. Ewing—has talked enchantingly. I've had an art evening with him myself." He bestowed a glance of benevolent approval on Ewing, who smiled in return.

"By the way, my lady, I've sent you a brace of birds that lived their little span of woods life between last spring and yesterday. Ah, but they came to a fluent richness of body, brown and plump and tender as first love, and tanged with autumn spices—so blessed be the piece that [153] brought them low. Doctor, you'd dissect them for their nerve centers or the intricacies of their bone structure, but I find them admirable in all aspects. They rejoice my scientific soul even as they lure my carnal man. Isn't it Duceps, the falconer, friend of old Izaak, who speaks of birds that both feed and refresh man—'feed him with their choice bodies, and refresh him with their heavenly voices'? There was a normal person, now—not one-sided."

The atmosphere cleared of its cloud wrack as his speech flowed, marked by pointings of the small, crisp mustache and gracious little pauses of appeal to each of the listeners in turn.

From edible songsters he progressed to the cooking of these, and thence to speech on the art of cooking at large. There were pessimists, it seemed, to bemoan the day when a *maître d'hôtel* would die rather than outlive the dishonor of his master's table, as when Vatel stabbed himself because the fish for one of Condé's dinners failed to arrive on time—proving, as Savarin observed, that the fanaticism of honor could exist in the kitchen as well as in the camp. But in the opinion of the speaker these were pinchbeck heroics. Vatel would have been the truer Frenchman, certainly the better *chef*, if, instead of wreaking a messy violence on himself in his master's kitchen, he had contrived an *entrée* to replace the missing fish. And we should remember, too, that the French, good cooks as they are, have but elaborated an art for the germinal principals of which they are indebted to Italian genius. Italy first saw the revival of cookery as she first saw the revival of learning. The land of Savarin lay in darkness until light was brought by those incomparable artists in the train of Catharine de Medicis. One might recall how [154]

Montaigne was captivated in the land of Horace by the weighty manner of the *chef* of Cardinal Caraffa in discoursing upon the occultisms of his art. The Italians even then held the thing hardly second to theology.

The little man here permitted a pause in which he discarded his cigarette and readjusted the carnation in his lapel, with a sniff at its spiciness. Then he turned graciously to Ewing.

"But I must be off—time races so in this little nook! If you're stepping on, Mr.—Ah, yes—Ewing, to be sure—if you're leaving, I shall be glad to join you as far as the avenue. My dutiful love, lady, and to you, doctor, that virtue which superstition ascribes to your pellets. The word 'health' could never have been coined by the healthy, could it? I dislike to use the word baldly."

Ewing rose, glad of the exit thus provided. It was kind of people to concern themselves about his affairs, but he wished they could be less peculiar. He bowed to Mrs. Lowndes and shook hands with the doctor. He, at least, was understandable.

When they had gone the old lady faced her friend with a calmness that surprised him.

"Fred, what sorry, what terrible things can make us young again! I feel now as I felt that other night—just at this hour so many years ago—when I knew she'd gone—knew she'd gone."

"He's Kitty's boy." The big man fronted her as if for a feat of persuasion.

"Don't, Fred! I've just weathered that point. I was weak, but Randall—Randall saved me. He's dreadful, Fred, unnatural, impossible—oh, terribly impossible!" She faced him dauntlessly, her [155] cheeks glowing with faint spots of color.

"I liked him, Kitty. He seems——"

"You're a physician, accustomed to monstrosities. He's something we don't speak of, my friend. And see—you *must* see—what he would suffer if he knew."

CHAPTER XVI [156]

TEEVAN AS SPECIAL PROVIDENCE

EWING was delighted by an invitation from the little man to dine. They had reached the avenue after walking in silence through a side street. Such moments were rare with Teevan. Not often did he fail of speech, even in his periods of calculation. But this was a moment requiring nice adjustments. The suggestion about dinner came as they paused at the corner.

"If you'd like to have me I'd be mighty glad," responded Ewing.

They turned toward Ninth Street, and Ewing told of his hour at Mrs. Lowndes', scarce conscious of Teevan's questioning, for the little man probed with an air of discreet condolence that would have won a far more reticent talker. Ewing was gratified by this attention from a man who knew the world of cities, and whose mind must usually be occupied with affairs of importance. He felt himself drawn to Teevan by bonds of sympathy that tightened momentarily.

"My dear mother-in-law is a sentimental thing," the little man confessed with a delicate intimation of apology. "She makes any sad tale her own. The theater affects her, the woes of stage creatures, quite as you tell me your own very human little story did. My arrival must have saved you from one of her rather absurd manifestations. She's a dear old soul, with quantities of temperament, but she recovers with amazing facility, I'm bound to say. If you met her to-morrow [157] she'd likely freeze you with a nod."

Ewing was not sorry to hear this, though he thought it hardly polite to say so.

When they reached the house in Ninth Street Teevan ushered in his guest with a charming hospitality.

"Come to the library. The man will bring you an *aperitif* while I escape from this accursed frock coat. Not a word about your own dress! I took you as you were—but a jacket for me, if you'll pardon it." A servant entered in answer to his ring.

"Sherry and bitters, Farrish, and Mr. Ewing will dine with us. Is my son in?"

"Mr. Alden is dining out, sir."

"All the better, my boy. We shall be the chummier for Alden's absence. Make the house yours while I change. There are the evening papers; or perhaps you'll be interested by those cabinet bits—jades and scarabs and junk of that sort; a few fairish pieces of Greek glass—that Tanagra isn't bad, nor those Limoges enamels. The netsukes and sword guards are rather good Japanese bits, and there are one or two exquisite etchings on ivory—*un instant, n'est-ce pas?*"

Ewing lay back in his chair and sipped the sherry when it came. His enjoyment of the room's ensemble was too nearly satisfying to require examination of it by detail. It was a room of discreet and mellowed luxury, with an air of jaunty ripeness that distinguished its composer. The chairs solicited, the walls soothed, the broken light illumined perfectly without dazzling. He was thrilling agreeably to his host's evident interest in him when the latter returned, beaming with a smile of rare good-fellowship.

They were presently at table in a dining room whose plain old mahogany and thin silver [158] produced, like the library, an impression of finished luxury without flaunt. The dinner itself possessed an atmosphere of sophistication, a temperament, even. It sated the exigent appetite of Ewing—his luncheon with Sydenham had been a mere adventure in meagerness—and sated without cloying, but it was more than food to him. As he ate, and drank of a burgundy whose merit he was ill qualified to appraise, he was conscious of a real fascination growing within him for the man who favored him with so distinguished a notice; who talked, seemingly, with the same nice care to please him that he would have exercised for a tableful of more difficult guests.

Nor did Teevan lack the parts of a listener. Ewing found himself talking much and enjoyably. With so tactful a listener, so good a friend, it was no longer necessary to remember that he was new in this land and unknowing of its smaller ways. It occurred to him, indeed, as he reviewed this memorable evening, that he had talked more than his host. But he was spared the youthful blush at this by remembering that he had been questioned persistently—"toled," as Ben would have said, with baits of inquiry. Incredible as it seemed, Teevan wished him to talk and had neatly made him do so. He felt that the little man must know him through and through. He had been, of course, a book in large print and short words, but he was flattered to believe that Teevan had found him worth opening.

And now he was certain he had discovered the longed-for friend; one soul had come from the oblivious throng to touch his own, to call him out and speak him fair. He was companioned by one as likable as he was learned, by one who meant, it was intimated, to seek every opportunity to [159] befriend him.

And the need of such a friend became more and more apparent to Ewing as they sat in the library after dinner over coffee and liqueurs. It was brought upon him that he had never known his own rashness in braving so difficult a world with so modest an equipment. The tragedy of failure was a commonplace in the little man's experience. So many young dreamers like his guest were rejected after bitter trials. It was an inconsequential world, whose denizens chased butterflies and too often permitted sober worth to perish by the wayside.

At times during the evening Ewing had feared a return of that distressing malady to which his host was subject, but this he was happily spared.

When he took a reluctant leave it was with two emotions: a fervent liking for the wise man who had so generously befriended him, and doubt of himself, the first he had known. It came like an icy blast out of summer warmth and shine.

Teevan listened for the door to close on his guest. When he heard this he sank into his chair and chuckled gaspingly. Presently he drank a glass of brandy, smiled in remembering pleasure, lighted a cigarette, and took his post on the hearth rug, his eyes dancing elfishly, his lips moving.

His son found him so an hour later, for the little man was tireless even when, lacking an audience, he merely dramatized his own reflections. Seeing him to be familiarly engaged, Alden Teevan would have withdrawn with a careless, half-contemptuous nod, but his father detained him with a gesture, and a sudden setting of his face into purposeful hardness.

"Sit down." He looked into the hall, then closed the door and faced his son. The latter regarded [160] him with coolly impertinent interest.

"You'd make a ripping conspirator in a melodrama, Randy. What you going to do now—steal the will?"

Teevan laughed grimly. He crossed back to the hearth rug and took a fresh cigarette, which he lighted with studious deliberation. His words followed swiftly upon the first exhalation of smoke, and his eyes fastened venomously on his son's.

"I'll give you a morsel to jest with—conspirator, indeed!—yes, and a will. See if that facile wit of yours is up to it, my bonny stripling." He played with his moment, drawing on the cigarette with leisurely relish, and gazing into the smoke with eyes of an absorbed visionary.

"Well?" The young man yawned ostentatiously.

"You missed dining with your brother this evening. He was good enough to break bread at my table."

The young man took a cigarette from the lacquered bowl at his side and lighted it with the same deliberation his father had shown.

"Really? I didn't know you had another son."

"Thank God I haven't—but your mother had, and that precious sniveling grandmother of yours has another grandson. You might recall that when you chatter of melodrama—and wills. I believe her estate is not one you'd care to divide."

"What rot are you gibbering with those monkey airs of yours?"

"Delicate as ever in your raillery! Perhaps you think I'm drunk. Perhaps I am. But I dropped in on your grandmother this afternoon in time to prevent her clasping that nameless whelp to her [161] breast. A lovely bit I spoiled, my merry-andrew!—tears and fondlings to-night, a codicil to-morrow. I'm none too sure there'd have been a codicil, though. Likelier a new will—'give, devise, and bequeath the sum of one dollar to my grandson Alden Teevan, who has already wheedled me out of more than was good for him, and the residue of my estate, both real and personal, to my beloved grandson, Gilbert Denham Ewing——'"

"Ewing! That chap Nell Laithe brought back with her—that rustic lout——"

"Have I won your attention, lad? Another item I chance to recall—permit me, since you've mentioned the lady's name—have you caught the look of her eye as it rests upon the creature—how it follows him, runs to him, hangs upon him with sweet tenacity? Have you felt the glow in her voice as she speaks to him? A woman of the world, young, tender, romantic, stormed by this Galahad of the hills, who first wins her solicitude by his helplessness, and then, before the lady quite knows it, coerces her whole being by sheer masculine dominance. Ah, you haven't read that—only enough of it to puzzle you, perhaps enrage you. You haven't your father's eyes. I read it all in three glances: one at him and two at her. Decidedly, you've not your father's eyes."

"Nor his love of many words. So that's the son of my mother, of the woman who failed to adore you after a brief but heroic effort?"

"Likewise, I dare say, the lover of a woman who will henceforth fail to appraise you at anything like your extraordinary worth. Such blind things they are, eh, my boy? She regards the two of you superficially, *bien entendu*, and hence to your prejudice. There's a likeness between you, the [162] same cast of face, even a likeness of voice, and your noses are identical—the nose of that woman—but the differences are all in his favor. You have grace of a drawing-room sort, a certain boudoir polish of manner, but his face is fresher, kinder, quicker of sympathy, more compelling, and there's that out-of-doors look in his eye, the look of readiness and power. You know what that sort of strength means with the pretty animals."

"You speak bitterly—but then, you've competed with that sort."

"My unhappy infant! You'd at least have found a barren sort of dignity in actual competition. As it is——"

"You got her by a trick, I've heard, from the man who took her away from you when she'd found you out."

"Tell that to your grandmother—it may help you out of some money."

"Stop it, governor! I'll quit if you will. Come!" He spoke with a drop of the voice, and lifted a hand in appeal.

"When you like—I've wasted no words."

"It's true, all you've said? Grandmother knows?"

"Thirty seconds later and I'd have had to bless the pair."

"And now?"

"It's safe for the present. She forgot. She'll remember to-morrow. I'd trust him back there then. She'd see only an obscene excrescence."

"It's a pleasant situation!"

"It's hellish! Can you imagine *my* feelings? You've touched on them with your graceful, filial banter."

"What will you do?" [163]

"'What will you do?'" He mimicked the other with a snarl. "Well, I begin by having him to dine. I study him, I win him. I have him now. He will dine with me other times. I'm not so sure he won't come to reverence me. Oh, it's an ideal situation! Damn it! How they fall! *We* couldn't contrive them half so cunningly. The fool hath said in his heart 'There is no God'—a fool, indeed! There is a God, and He has a devil in Him, or He couldn't have given me this to play out. I have him, I tell you, her son and his son, think of it—her lover's son that they both loved—served up to me!"

"What can you do with him?"

"*Do* with him?" The elder man eyed his son for a long minute, then dropped into a chair, and for an interval the young man pursued his rather uncomfortable reflections in silence. At last he broke this with another query. As there was no response, and his father's face was turned away, he rose and sauntered in front of him. The eyes met his musingly, and he saw that the mouth was fixed in a rather hideous smile.

CHAPTER XVII

[164]

AN ELUSIVE VENUS

THE days that followed were marked for Ewing with a puzzling discouragement; puzzling, because there had been no failure. A failure would have left him reliant, however battered, but nothing good had been disproved. He was fighting some black doubt of himself, insidiously nursed, he knew not how.

His friend, Randall Teevan, almost an intimate since the night they dined together, daily predicted great works of him. Where the careless picture makers of the Rookery were content with assurances that he could turn out marketable "stuff," Teevan showed him far and lofty eminences that he might scale, had he a spirit for the feat.

Undoubtedly there were obstacles that would daunt a less spirited novice, or one with less than the supreme powers of his young friend, but he, the intrepid, the enduring one, could surmount them. The danger in this time of 'prenticeship, Teevan suggested, was sluggish content with a cheap facility. The tyro learns to do a thing that sells, and remains commercially solvent but, spiritually, an example of arrested development—artistically dead.

He left Ewing at these times with a sense of his present futility, but also with a genial pity for the men who were doing things to sell—and selling them; all unconscious of the remote, the [165] vacant summits, of true art. A little while before he would have rejoiced that his work could appear beside the work of these men. That would have been a triumph glorious enough. But he could no longer desire so mean a success. He must strive for the higher things, if for no other reason, because this fastidious critic expected him to accomplish them. He could not affront that captious taste with things done for a dollar. Teevan, it seemed, had found life wearing on his dearest illusions. Contact with the world had left him little to believe in. Yet he confessed to believe in Ewing; confessed it with a shamed, humorous *naívetée*, and with pleasant half doubts, as a man of tried unbelief laying a bed to fall back on at his next undeceiving.

Ewing was fired to high resolve by this witty, this tender betrayal of confidence in his powers. He could not bear to think that his friend should one day find him, too, a bit of specious insincerity. He consecrated himself to guard this last illusion. It was a pleasure, a duty, and an ambition whose rewards would magnify them both.

The hill boy no longer yearned solitary in the crowd for a day with Ben Crider, or perhaps an evening with him of little easy silences. Teevan filled his needs. In some sort the little man became his idol; a constant presence before which every act of his days must be judged. Teevan was a smiling but inexorable arbiter of his destiny: a judge humane but incorruptible, a man experienced in the obliquities of human nature, but never tolerant of these.

Teevan showed him pictures, the work of masters, piloting him through galleries with instructive comment. Ewing instinctively felt the accuracy of his taste, and divined the soundness [166] of his technical knowledge. Often he overlooked a blemish of bad drawing till Teevan pointed it out. Often Teevan defined to his eye some masterly bit of lining in a picture otherwise hopeless. And of color, that splendid mystery, thing of trick and passion, the little man discoursed with rare sanity.

After these provings of his expertness, Ewing was humble when Teevan chose to point out the more striking deficiencies of his own work. If Teevan made him feel that he must unlearn the vicious little he knew, he performed the duty with a tact that left the youth as large with gratitude as with discouragement. It was by Teevan's counsel that he went to the school. The men of the Rookery tried to dissuade him from that.

"They can't give you anything you haven't got," warned Baldwin. "And if you don't act stubborn they may spoil what you have. You've learned your A B C's, and they'll only tell you at the school to learn them another way. They'll make you feel like a clumsy ass. Stay away."

Well-meant advice, but superficial, as Teevan observed when he heard of it.

"Your friend confirms what I suspected," he went on, with a pleasant glint in his eyes. "Those chaps would have you become a decent hack on the pitiful facility you've already acquired. Pitiful, mark me, as compared with your capacity. But I've learned to expect little in this world of weak purpose. I dare say you won't endure it long at the school. I grant you a fortnight there; then you'll tell me you give up."

He began his lessons at the League next day, fired with intent to please his friend. He would [167] fail, yes—fail seventy times seven, but he would stand up.

He went, however, a little weighed down by the memory of his various advisers. From the entrance he was directed above by an official-looking person who yawned. Then he found himself in one of many cramped, stall-like compartments, facing a plaster woman who crouched on one knee. His position was between two youths who were annoyed by his nearness. When he edged from the glowering of one the other nudged his drawing board with an indignant elbow. There was no retreat, for the students were packed closely about him. The one behind him made disparaging remarks about the dimensions of his back, which seemed unkind, considering that he

did not hesitate to use the back from time to time as an easel.

The air was hot and thick with charcoal dust. The crowded disorder confused him. He tried to think only of the cast. He began at the head, as was his custom, and felt a moment's exhilaration in studying the delicate shadows beneath the filleted curls.

He was aroused by sounds of derision from behind, and ominous prophecies of what "Old Velvet" would do to him when he caught sight of that pompadour. He observed then that the other men were not working at the head first, but mapping out the entire figure at once with long, raking, angular lines that blocked the shadows in square masses. He half rose and looked about. They were all working alike, with their drawing boards far out, and with blunt charcoal. He had spent half an hour sharpening his, and had hugged his drawing board.

He sat down again, impelled by protests from behind and drew the entire figure, but he could [168] not bring himself to do it in those rude angles. He drew it with a single line—down the curving flank, about the gracious knees, skirting the feet, and up once more to round the farther shoulder that drooped above the nestling breast. Although he did not know it, this was a feat; the swing of the body was almost perfect, yet he had not skirmished a moment.

The youth behind him was now peering through spectacles above his shoulder.

"You're a queer duck!" he said; "but he'll make you do it his way. What do you mean by drawing like that?"

"Why?" asked Ewing, confused. "Let's see yours."

The other exhibited. There was no outline, there were no gracious curves, only a suggestion of angular shadows, scratched across with brutal straightness. Yet, when Ewing squinted his eyes a bit the thing stood out.

"Wait till I get *my* shadows in," he said.

"Cart before the horse!" rejoined the critic. "I see your finish with the old man."

Ewing started to lay in his shadows as the other had done, but it seemed as if that delicate body appealed for gentler treatment. He rubbed out the vandal lines and began swinging around the figure in the curving strokes habitual with him, strokes that nursed each lovely rondure like caresses. Then, until the closing hour, he polished, picking out the precious little reflected lights that saved her treasures from shadow.

"Red ruin for you, my boy!" exclaimed the spectacled one behind him. "Ravage and slaughter! Old Velvet will scalp you."

Ewing stood up, released by his neighbors, who now rose in a clatter of toppled stools. [169]

"What's the matter with it?" he asked.

"Finicky! You've *fussed* it to death. Velvet will slay you for those reflected lights alone—and your nice curly lines—oh, Lord!"

"But they're there, those lights," protested Ewing. "And it's the way I've always drawn. I suppose there are different methods."

"There's only one way with Velvet, and that's Velvet's way." Then with a damnatory waving-away of the offensive drawing he sauntered off to put his stuff in his locker.

Ewing dined alone that night. He was in no mood for Teevan.

Back in his place next day, still incredulous of defeat so swift, he waited for the master. He watched him going the rounds of the other students, the light playing on the purple velvet of the garment that gave him his title. His beard was a rich growth, his mustaches curled upward at the ends, his large, heavy eyelids drooped in a perpetual *ennui*. His usual criticism was a weary "Rub it out!"

When at last he stood beside Ewing's work he gave an effect of collapsing, as if his whole being cried out: "This is too much!" He took the drawing from the board and stuck it to the wall with two thumb tacks. Then, picking up a bit of charcoal, he wrote across it, "A perfect example of how not to do it."

He did not return to Ewing, but, after examining a few other drawings, he turned to leave the room. As he passed, Ewing reached across two neighbors—who protested—and caught the velvet jacket.

"Perhaps you can give me an idea," he said. The other looked at him as if he had not seen him [170] before.

"Use intelligence! Good God—use intelligence!" he almost wailed, and made his escape.

Ewing mechanically placed a fresh sheet before him and began again, but he rubbed out as fast as he drew. The next morning he found the paper foul from many erasures, and started afresh. He could see now that his first drawing, posted in irredeemable ignominy, was not all that it should be. It lacked the freedom of work he had done in his solitude. He tried to conjure back that old free feeling, but the days passed and it drew farther away. Some of the students changed

places and began on other casts. The better men went every other week into the life class. But Ewing stayed desperately by his crouching woman. He studied her until he loved and loathed her. The master came and went. Sometimes he ignored Ewing. When he did notice him it was always with a fresh blow on the sunk heart of the boy. Once he sat in his place and ran some of his own brusque, effective lines along the figure, the lines that every other youth in the room punctiliously imitated. They mingled with Ewing's strokes as a driving rain mingles with a bed of flowers.

"If you'd only give up your damned little way," he complained.

"I wish you'd explain a bit," pleaded the boy.

"Old Velvet" turned to the spectacled young man. "Give him your study. There, do it like that."

Then came the beginning of the end. He lost himself in a crawling blindness of imitation. The old power that had made him draw without knowing how he did it gathered its splendid garments and withdrew as mysteriously as it had once come to possess him. He drew, but he would no [171] longer have recognized what he did as the work of his own hand. He thought of Griggs, who had said, "Style?—I'd know a scrap of your stuff if I found it in an ash barrel in Timbuctoo!"

The thought of those friendly men knowing his degradation was another stone on the grave of his self-esteem. It was this that made him wait when the others had gone one night, to take down that first crucified drawing from the wall where it had remained, torn and hanging by one tack.

"Will you give it to me?" said a voice, and, as he did not care one way or the other, the spectacled young man put it in his portfolio. Afterwards Ewing thought of asking him why he wanted it, but he did not come back again. He had been advanced to the life class.

The master did not speak to Ewing again. He made, at intervals as he passed, the pantomime of rubbing out. And Ewing obeyed, beginning each time the task that grew day by day more hatefully useless. In the beginning he had felt that if he could get that plaster woman off by himself he could draw her. The long habit of solitude had left him confounded by the crowd. There had been something almost shameful to him about drawing publicly, and he had the impulse to curl an arm about his sketch to hide it a little as he worked. He felt sick with the hot, dry air and the breathing of the stallful of men. When the door was opened the odor of turpentine came from the room where they were painting. It had for him a familiar, happy smell.

"I wish I could go in there," he said once to a fat youth beside him.

"That's what the dubs always say," was the reply. "It's so much easier to paint." [172]

He spent a day going around, looking at the better students' work, asking them how they had learned to draw as "Old Velvet" wanted them to. They had a great many things to say that sounded technical, but he heard nothing that opened a way to him.

He hated the school; he hated the street that led to it, with a quiet ground swell of hatred. But, deepest of all, he hated his own despair. He felt that his shattered courage would never heal. He was like a dishonored soldier whose sword has been publicly broken. He remembered the fine things he had said to Teevan about his ambition, and the blush that suffused him ached. At the thought of Mrs. Laithe bringing him from his wild beast's hole, as if he had been worth her splendid faith, his heart withered within him. At intervals he started as if he suddenly awoke, saying to himself, "And to think it could have ended like this!"

At the end of a fortnight he sat for three days without doing anything, a stick of charcoal in his hand. He did not come again, and his fat neighbor used up his charcoal paper, after putting fine mustaches on all his crouching Venuses.

He had shunned his acquaintances during this time of travail. But twice had he seen Teevan since his first day at the League. He had tried to be cheerful at those meetings, still hoping the lines would come right, but he felt each time that Teevan saw straight to his wretched heart of doubt; and he would not risk another meeting until he could report an overwhelming victory—or defeat, if it must be so.

That he did not for a day forget his good friend, there was ample testimony; though this was of [173] a nature that Teevan must remain oblivious to. On the night of the day that saw his first buffeting he walked the streets until late, rejoicing mournfully that there were still so many people who did not know his shame. Half unwittingly he wandered into Ninth Street, and stood a long time opposite Teevan's house, finding a solace in his friend's possible nearness. Then, as the days of defeat followed with so deadly a sequence, this walk and vigil became his nightly habit. Sometimes the house was darkened. Then he felt free to gaze at it. Sometimes there were lights, and his survey was brief and furtive. Until the very last there was always a bit of hope to spice the melancholy of this adventure: to-morrow the thing might be done as they all did it, the master be moved from blame to praise, and himself be free to enter this street bravely, noisily, careless of recognition, to tell how the big way had been opened. He had pictured the pleasure that would light Teevan's face as he heard this tale of conquest.

CHAPTER XVIII

[174]

MRS. LAITHE IS IN

ON the ultimate night of defeat Ewing walked as usual into Ninth Street for his vigil before Teevan's house. He had come to a wall that must be scaled. He could no longer believe in any chance way round it or gracious opening through it. Teevan would have to be told, and he was sorry for Teevan. The little man had believed so.

He scanned the starred strip of sky above him as if for words to renew the faith of his friend. His eye ran along the house fronts opposite, but they were blunt, uninspiring masses with shut doors and curtained windows, houses turned away from him. He wished for another friend, less exacting than Teevan, who would take defeat lightly. Then one of the houses stood out familiarly, the Bartell house, with its generous width and its hospitable white door. He had not cared to go there in his time of suspense, but now he was overwhelmed with a sudden longing to see Mrs. Laithe, to feel her friendliness and confide to her, perhaps, a hint of his plight. At least he could look at her a little while, even if he told her nothing.

He crossed the street quickly, walked toward the avenue until he reached the marble steps, and rang the bell. It occurred to him dismally while he waited that she might not be in; still worse, that there might be people about who would keep him from her. It had been so most of the [175] few times he had called. There was always friendliness in the look she gave him across those shoreless seas of talk, but too often there had been little beside this look.

The man admitted him and was not sure if Mrs. Laithe was in; he would see. Ewing strolled back to the soothing snugness of the library and dropped on the couch. Even to be there alone was something: the room was alive with her, and the restful quietness of it made him conscious all at once of the long strain he had been under. Leaning his head back, he shut his eyes in a sort of desperate surrender, letting the tragedy of his failure swirl about him. But something from the woman he awaited seemed to have flowed in upon him, healing his hurt with gracious little reminders of her. He breathed a long sigh of relief, and for a moment almost lost himself in unconscious rest. It was good to stop thinking.

It was thus she saw him as she came softly in, with scarce a silken rustle. Her face, as she gazed, lost its look of welcome and ready speech, for she saw all his anguish uncovered there before her. It was in his young face, gaunt and jaded and bleached to the city pallor; in the closed eyes, the folded lips; and in the body wearily relaxed. So little life he showed, it seemed to her he might be sleeping, and again, as at the other time, she was shaken by a rush of tenderness for him—tenderness and fear, alike terrible.

She could not speak. She hovered a half step toward him, with a hand instinctively up to shelter and cherish, her eyes wide with pity and a great gladness. Poised so, she waited, breathless.

Though she had made no sound, he thrilled suddenly to the knowledge of her presence, and his [176] eyes opened to hers. They stared dully an instant, then shone with a quick light that held her exposed and defenseless, while he came to himself—for the first time in her presence—as a man. Helpless to stay it, she watched this consciousness unfolding within him, traced it lucidly from its birth to the very leaping of it from his lips in a smothered cry of want unutterable.

So he held her with his look. Though every nerve warned her to flight, she was powerless even when he started toward her, raising himself slowly from the couch with his hands; her own hand even groped a little toward him, blindly fighting its way into both his own. It turned and nestled there, unreasoningly, warming itself, clasping and unclasping. He towered above her—she had never felt herself so small, so frail as now. His two hands fiercely smothered her own, and his eyes were on her with a look she had never seen there, a look she could not face. It was then that her tenderness was lost in fear of him, and she forced herself to laugh. She laughed in the desperate knowledge that his rising arm threatened her with some crushing, blinding enfoldment where no striving would avail her—laughed with a little easy, formal grace.

He fell back dazed, scanning her in uncomprehending dismay as they stood apart. Then he seemed to recover himself and smiled foolishly as she moved to a chair.

"I'm so glad you came," she began with nervous quickness. He dropped back on the couch, his eyes still on her—the man's eyes.

She endured the look, but she could not suppress the color she felt rising in her face. It seemed to her that her strength must go if the moment lasted a little longer. She knew now that in the [177] weeks of his absence she had longed for this look—for the fearful joy of it—and the realization left her overpowered.

At last, to her relief, he muttered some conventional phrase of his own pleasure in seeing her. But the look of the man still held her, an implacable look. She felt that the shy, embarrassed boy in him was gone forever. She had aged him all in a moment. There was something splendidly ruthless in his gaze, and in place of the confusion she was wont to wreak on him he showed a strange, dogged coolness.

"You've changed," he continued. "You're not well." The wondrous deep alarm of his tone

warmed her through and through. She murmured a careless disavowal, and her low laugh, like the little comprehending chuckle of a pleased child, banished from her face for a moment its almost haggard set. But the face was flatly white again under the dark of her hair, and the white gown defined her frailness and drooping, as of some pale, long-stemmed flower fainting of languor in the still heat of late summer.

"You are whiter than ever," he insisted, "whiter and finer. You are like a white rose that is beginning to let its petals fall. You—you are beyond anything now." She laughed helplessly, as people laugh at something insupportable.

"You're going to tell me that people don't talk that way here," he went on, with his old fling of the head, like that of a horse about to gallop off, "but you understand me." He sighed, remembering his trouble for the first time. "But you understand me," he repeated, with a wistful attenuation of the words.

"Yes, I understand—everything," she said, seeing again the amazing sadness in him. Her look [178] seized all the dejection of his attitude, the listless lean of his head, once upheld so gayly on the strong neck. She had to exert her will not to go nearer to him. She turned away and closed her eyes for a moment to shut him out, then opened them quickly and began to berate him charmingly for having neglected her. "I've thought of you so much oftener than I've seen you," she concluded.

He floundered in the old shyness. It had come suddenly on him when he thought of himself.

"I've been—at work."

"Your face shows it," she said, with a swift, unsteady look. "You have changed, too. You actually look ill."

He reddened slowly under her scrutiny, stammering protestations, but her eyes were open to him. She shrugged herself together and assumed a brisk, motherly air.

"Is it as bad as *that*—truly? And you told me nothing of it! Come—I want to know." There was a ring of authority in her voice as she leaned toward him, her great eyes full of pity and succor. "Is the world different from what you thought? Let me know—where does it hurt? That's what they say to children."

Challenged thus directly, he felt shame at the thought of confession equally direct. He would come to it only by winding ways, asserting at first that there was no trouble; then that the trouble was but a little one; and insisting at last that, though the trouble was great, it might have been greater.

Her eyes beat upon him insistently while she drove him to these admissions. Then she was eager with attention while he compelled himself to details. He told of his two weeks' humiliation at the school, not sparing himself, confessing his lack of power, and the pain this discovery had [179] cost him. When he had finished, with a self-belittling shrug, she sat silent, bending forward, her hands loosely clasped, her eyes fixed away from him.

Now that it was over he felt a sudden lightening of his mood, a swift consciousness of reliance on the woman, a foreknowledge that her words would profit him. At last she brought her eyes upon him and cut to the heart of his woe with a single stroke.

"The thing is nothing in itself." He drew a long breath of relief. "It's in the way you take it. If it weakens you, it's bad. If it strengthens you, it's good. Call the thing 'failure' if you like—but what has it done to you?"

"Why, of course"—he broke off to laugh under her waiting look—"of course I'm still in the race. I see now that I haven't really doubted myself at all." He looked at her with sudden sharpness. "I'd be ashamed to doubt myself before you." He sprang to his feet in the excitement of this discovery and stood alertly before her.

"It doesn't mean anything, does it?" he went on quickly. "You believe in me?"

She laughed defensively. "I believe in you now. You look so much less like a whipped schoolboy."

"I won't forget again. That school isn't for me. I can do things those poor charcoal dusters won't do for years yet. I know that. Baldwin said they'd spoil me if I wasn't stubborn, and I *was* stubborn—I am. You believe I'm stubborn, don't you?"

She smiled assurance. "You have it—can you use it?"

"You'll see!" He sat down, continuing almost apologetically, "I worried more about the effect on [180] others than on myself. It was that threw me down, a fear that other people might think I was some pretentious fool who had come here to get over big things and stumbled at the first little one. I was deathly afraid of hurting other people."

His eyes had been steadily upon hers with an under-current of consciousness for what he would have called the "queerness" of her look, a baffling look that hinted of many things—of sympathy, consternation, rejoicing, even of embarrassment, and yet it had not distinctly been any one of these, so quick had been the play of light in her eyes to the moment they fell before his.

She released her breath with a sound like a sigh, as if she had been holding it, and there was another look in her eyes when she at last raised them to his, one that he could not read, save that it was wholly serious and, he felt, peculiarly a woman's look.

"I am sure," she began, "that no one—no one you consider in this way, could think less of you for a failure. You ought to know that. I want you to know it." She rose from her chair and stepped to the table with a little shrug, turning over the leaves of a magazine, her back toward him. At last she turned her head only, looking at him over one shoulder and speaking with a laughing, reckless impatience.

"Oh, fail—fail—fail as often as you like—fail a hundred times and then—fail." He felt his cheeks burning under her vehemence. She turned about, facing him squarely.

"Have I said enough? Do you know what I think of failures now?"

He rose and stood before her. "You don't know what you've done for me. You don't know—" [181]
Again came that crude impulse to take her in his arms. It left him feeling like a criminal. As if she had discerned this she resumed her seat, speaking quickly.

"Go back to that studio and do things. Do them your own way. It's a better way for you than any they can teach you, and the next time——"

"The next time I have a hell——"

"—a hell of doubt—don't wait—come to me." She rose from her chair.

"You don't know all this has meant to me," he said feelingly as she gave him her hand.

"Good night!" And though the gray eyes were hidden from his, there was the look in them of one who knows more than she is thought to know.

As Ewing went out the man was admitting the younger Teevan, who asked for Mrs. Laithe. Ewing wished it had been the father. He had much of good to tell the little man now.

Neither Mrs. Laithe nor Teevan spoke of Ewing after their greeting, though each was so busy in thought of him that their talk was scant and aimless for the first five minutes. Alden Teevan was brought back to her at length by noticing the drawn, tired look of her face, for the sparkle that Ewing had left there was gone.

"Nell, you look done up. I'm no alarmist, but you really need to be frightened. What is it you're doing to take you down so—the same old round? Is it a visiting guild now, or the Comforters of the Worthy Poor, or just amateur nursing of sin, sickness, and death?"

She smiled wanly.

"The same old round, Alden. I can't keep away from it when I am here. I know it so well. No one [182]
could keep away who knew it well."

"Futile, futile, futile! Are you equal to a revolution?"

"More's the pity, no. And I've no time for one. I've a whole family of consumptives on my hands at this moment, father, mother, two girls and a boy."

"And you wear yourself out over a few minor effects like that, instead of going at the cause. You may save one or two of those people—none of them of any value, individually; while the same energy put to the root of the evil might save thousands—and they *are* of value in the mass. Think me calloused if you like, but that's mere common sense economy of effort. You and I—our class—make them live as they do, and we grow maudlin over it and take them a little soup and many tracts. But we won't remit our tithes. We keep them down to breed more misery for the exercise of our little philanthropic fads. I'm radical, you see."

She turned her head away with a hand wave that seemed to dismiss an argument familiar and outworn.

"I know—but I must do what I can."

He faced her with a sudden insistent energy.

"Come away, Nell—come farther off. You're too close to the ugly things now—you lose the perspective. Come away—and come with me, won't you, Nell? Come away and live. I must say it—I must ask it—come!"

He read the inexorable in the lift of her head.

"I understand, Alden—and I thank you—but no." She glanced across at him and continued more lightly, "I wasn't meant to go far off—to go above timber line, as Mr. Ewing would say."

He felt bitterness rising in him at her mention of the name, but he laughed it away. [183]

"You'll always do the hardest thing, Nell. I know that. But I—well, one of the old heathen—Heraclitus, wasn't it?—remarked that the ass, after all, would have his thistles rather than much fine gold."

She laughed. "Dad would say, the more ass he, if he wouldn't."

"I know—we'd rather have our own particular thistles, each of us. But to live a day or two before we die, Nell! Come with me—stop trying to mount the whirlwind. You'll only be thrown."

Again she shook her head, and gently shaped "No!" with her lips. It was too unemotionally decisive to warrant of any further urging, and he became silent, with something of pain in his face that her eye caught.

"I'm sorry, Alden—I've never liked you better—but I'd rather you didn't ask."

"You wouldn't have come before, would you, Nell—three months ago?" And she answered "No" again, very quickly.

"I must play my little game out in my own way," she continued. "I must stay beside some one—beside people—who still have heart for trying."

"Someone, Nell?"

She caught her lip.

"Everyone who has fresh hope and stubbornness in defeat."

"If you'd let me, Nell—" There was the note of real pleading in his tone.

"No, Alden."

"Friends, though?" he queried, seeming at last convinced.

She thought there was a trace of bitterness in his voice, but she answered, "Friends, surely, Alden." [184]

"We've skirted this thing often, Nell, but you never seemed certain before."

"I didn't—I think I never was *quite* so certain before, Alden—but now I'm driven all one way."

"I believe that." He rose and spoke in a livelier manner. "But if you won't be wise for me, Nell, be wise for some one else. For God's sake feel a little worry about your health. I say you look unpromising at this moment."

"I've always been well," she insisted brightly.

"And, Nell, I've wanted to be so much more than a friend to you that my feelings are a bit blurred just now—but I believe I'll always do what a friend should."

CHAPTER XIX [185]

THE UNBLAZED WAY

EWING was loath to sleep that night, for in sleep he must leave the thought of her who, having been only a picture to him, had come suddenly to life. The magic would have seemed no greater if his own mother had issued livingly from the canvas. How it had happened he knew not, but this woman was all at once the living spring of his life. The thought of her was a golden mist enveloping him. He did not once call it love, but he thought of the gracious women he had loved in books, and knew she was all of them in one.

And once he had been almost careless in her presence! How he marveled at that now, when he knew that henceforth every approach to her would be an event. He shuddered at the memory of what he had been saved from—that swift brute impulse to hold her close against his breast. Must he feel that always—fight it always, to be blasted if he lost? At least in his own secret world he was free to treasure each memory of her dearness. And he could make her glad. He could work as man had not worked before. He could make her a little glad.

He feverishly began a drawing for the *Knickerbocker* the next morning. Craig, the art editor, had said that he could use six drawings as good as the two he was shown, and they had decided on scenes that would give variety to the series. But that was before a Teevan had come into his life, and now he had lost a month in the dream of satisfying that patron critic. [186]

It was good to prove that he could still draw in his own way; he had suffered so long in that rage of impotence; and he kept to the work until dusk, making no stop for food, even when the noise of falling bodies came to mark the luncheon hour.

When Teevan sauntered in at six the two went to dine at a restaurant. Ewing had no longer dreaded the meeting. He was ready to show Teevan that there had been no true failure. But Teevan merely listened to the bare outline of fact as they threaded a way through the evening crowd. He made no comment, and Ewing thought this might be due to the difficulty of conversing in a noisy street.

But after ordering dinner with a nice deliberation, Teevan spoke determinedly of other matters. Ewing ventured a humorous reference to his despair when he left the school, meaning to compel the inference that he no longer despaired. Teevan languidly mentioned a violinist he had heard the evening before.

"—Two Bach numbers, the suite in F minor rather exquisitely done. Bach wrote tremendously well for the fiddle. Technical skill in the performer, you ask? Yes, entirely adequate; indeed, he gave rather a warm reading, really not lacking a certain elevation of style, even a nobility of utterance. That was quite all of interest, though. The Dvorak *humoresque*—a thing transcribed from a piano piece and made sentimental—has one of those effective passages in double notes, certain to win an encore from the mob; and the twenty-fourth caprice of Paganini was merely a smart exhibition of harmonic playing—mere squibs and firecrackers and rockets, the veriest [187] fireworks. Ah, it's small wonder the world has so few artists when it demands so little." And Teevan sighed significantly.

Ewing was chilled by this avoidance of himself, though he could not yet believe it intentional.

"I haven't given up," he declared, by way of reminding Teevan. "You shall see that I'm stubborn."

Teevan affected to study a group of diners at a neighboring table as he replied:

"Oh, yes, I gather that you left the school when you found it difficult."

"But you see——"

"This soup is worth while, really. Soup is surprisingly difficult. Yet the world believes perfect soups to be plentiful." He sighed again. "It merely shows the vitality of error."

Ewing felt his woman-given courage leaving him at this attack, or rather at this lack of attack. He had been prepared to have his friend exhibit doubt, disbelief, chagrin—anything that would still show an undiminished esteem. But the intimate note had gone from Teevan's speech. He talked at large as Ewing had heard him talk to roomfuls of people.

"Ah, yes, the vitality of error. Give the world a lie about soup or souls, and you'll not soon worry that lie away. It's clutched with a bulldog jaw. Say good soup is common—God-fearing Christians echo the lie. Say Berkeley denies the existence of matter, and men with Berkeley at hand repeat you. Say Locke denies all knowledge except through the medium of the senses, and students of Locke pass on the absurdity. Bacon was by no means the first thinker to proclaim the deficiencies [188] of the Aristotelian philosophy—a system already in disrepute when he wrote the 'Instauration.' Yet in our crude yearning for concreteness, for specific idols, we laud him as the father of the inductive philosophy—as if induction weren't an inevitable process in any mind grown beyond primitive concepts. Gad! I had a dog once that used induction a dozen times a day, and he'd never so much as heard of Bacon."

Thus he wandered afield during the dinner, with airs of a bored but conscientious host, and Ewing fell lower of heart at each of his periods. He hoped for his chance when the coffee came, but Teevan gave him no opening. The brandy sufficed for his text. We were not brandy-drinkers, unhappily enough—"the wholesomest of all spirits, the distilled essence of cognac grapes, the magic cup of Circe, 'her Orient liquor in a crystal glass'—and we know as little how to drink a liqueur brandy as we know how to buy it. We gulp it from these straight glasses, when it should be taken in sips from a glass small at the top, a glass first warmed in the palm of the hand. Only so may we capture the bouquet, that elusive fragrance of the May-vine blossom, that wraith of spring-perfumes."

Ewing was still unjustified when the waiter helped them on with their coats, and then he was dismayed to observe that Teevan apparently meant to leave him. The little man held out his hand with "So glad to have had your company—another time—I shall see you again, I hope."

"Please come back with me. I'd like to talk to you—to ask your advice." He felt himself an outcast.

Teevan's response, a surprised but coldly polite assent, did not lighten his dejection as they walked back to the studio in silence.

But once there the little man no longer avoided talk of his young friend's fiasco. He let it be [189] seen that another illusion, one fondly cherished, he need not say, had been shattered. He gave the impression that he had talked of other things to forget this—an inadequate device, he let it be inferred.

Ewing confessed his own despondency of the night before, but told how a woman had given him new courage.

"Not the least injury they do us," remarked Teevan of women, somewhat snappishly, "is to wheedle us into taking our failures lightly." That were especially baneful to the artist, it seemed; by his very temperament was he exposed to their blandishing sophistries. The artist cult should be a priesthood, aloof, austere, celibate—deaf to the woman cries of "Never mind!" and "Courage!" and "Another day!" All very well that, but they shut their pretty eyes to real failures, or, at most, survey them with a tender air of belittlement that leaves the defeated one blind to their significance. Speaking largely, the society of women should be shunned by earnest men

intent on achievement.

Ewing began to feel that possibly he had taken heart too readily. He was willing to believe this if it would restore him to the little man's esteem. He pointed timidly to the drawing he had begun that morning, eager for the word of praise he believed it to merit.

"Oh, *that*!" Teevan drawled the words, with lifted brows; then went on to speak of Jean François Millet, unprosperous villager of Barbizon. He tried—unsuccessfully—to recall an instance when that painter had debased his art. Not once had he made a cheap picture for a magazine. He had never put his Muse to the streets. Millet was not pigeon-livered.

[190] Ewing leaned forward in his chair, his head between his hands. He saw that the mere sale of drawings would be a savorless success, if it bereft him of this plain-speaking but just friend. More, it would leave him small in the eyes of a woman who was now even more than Teevan. He got up doggedly, seized the drawing and began to break the tough bristol board, getting it into four pieces at length and flinging these into the grate. He was unable to resist a secret fond look at the lines he had made with such loving care. Teevan's eyes glistened now, and he held out a hand to Ewing.

"Ah—you give me hope. Bravo!"

"Then you do believe in me; you think I have it in me?"

"Power? Yes; I've seen that. I judge men rather accurately. But I saw that you'd be tempted to rest. The more power, the greater the temptation. It's not so hard to fast in a desert—the less gifted man is less tempted. But to fast with plenty at hand for the reaching, and fair women to counsel content—to refuse apples and flagons, waiting for the ultimate jewel—that takes a *man*. It demands one—there's a certain street saying—who can 'stand the gaff.'"

"And you really think I can stand it? I feel more than ever that I want to succeed."

Teevan beamed on him almost affectionately. "I almost suspect——"

"You shall see that I can," Ewing broke in, but what he thought was, "*She* will see it."

[191] "It's a matter of endurance," resumed Teevan genially. "Genius is no endowment of supreme gifts. Every man of us has something latent that would set him apart. Genius is only the capacity for expressing that—that phase of yourself which differentiates you from all other selves. Of course only a few succeed. Most of us succumb to the general pressure to be alike. Yet—I almost believe in you."

Ewing regarded him with glad eyes, touched by this stanch yet discerning adherence.

Returning home that night Teevan, in his library, took down a Bible and searched for a passage he only half recalled. He found it at last, one wherein the God of Israel thunders, not without humor, against the foes of His chosen tribe.

"I will send a faintness into their hearts in the land of their enemies; and the sound of a shaken leaf shall chase them; and they shall flee as fleeing from a sword; and they shall fall when none pursueth." He chuckled delightedly as he read it, and wiped tears of mirth from his eyes.

So it befell that Ewing forsook the beaten road of minor achievement that winter, and labored toward the far, high peaks. In his own phrase, the trail was rough and blind. Preceding climbers had not been thoughtful to "blaze" it. But he grudged no effort while he had the little man's applause. And this was not lacking, though it was discreet applause, promoting no slothful content.

It was Ewing who suggested that he paint under the criticism of Sydenham. The little man looked at him in doubt, seeming to suspect a jesting insincerity, then burst into hearty, hand-clapping laughter, crying, "Splendid! An inspiration, indeed! On my word, I hadn't thought of anything half so brilliant."

[192] And Ewing began to paint; to paint like Sydenham, if he might—cloud studies, bits of street perspective, stretches of river, a realistic view of the roofs from his window, with their water butts, chimney pots, and clothes lines. Baldwin looked in once, and carried a word below to the men who sold things: the word "Awful!" He also ventured a friendly remonstrance to Ewing. "If you're going to paint, for God's sake go to some man who knows how!"

Ewing referred to Teevan's conviction that Sydenham was the ideal master for him, and to the attested fact that Teevan knew painting and painters.

"Then I don't understand Teevan," was Baldwin's puzzled response.

"But I'm coming on—Teevan says so."

Baldwin ventured another look at the canvas in hand and fled below.

Teevan was watchful and permitted few chances for meddling of this sort. He contrived to be with Ewing most of the time when Sydenham was not. And Ewing never tired of Sydenham. If they walked the streets together the old man would direct his eye to some unnoticed felicity of color on the walls that shut them in, to bits of enchanting perspective, to subtle plays of light and shade in unpromising spots. Or if they sat alone at night the painter told of color in the world

beyond the sea; how from the top of Mont Blanc the stars are seen at midday, points of vivid light in a dark blue-violet field; of the purple nights of the desert, the stars but an arrowshot above; of the cold, pale silvers of dawn in the desert, and the heated gold and scarlet of evening; of the impossible blue of the bay of Naples. His face glowed to such youthfulness at these times that Ewing would forget his futile years until the sigh came.

"But I've always seen too much. Only the fountain of Juventius could have given me time enough. I'm like the lad in the school-reader tale who reached into the jar of nuts and tried to withdraw his hand full—and lost them all." [193]

Between Ewing and Teevan there was even a new bond. Ewing discovered that money inevitably left one's pocket in New York, even if it vanished under auspices less violent and less obscure than Ben had so gloomily feared. The steady dribble was quite as effective. When he awoke to this great fiscal truth he saw that some condescension of effort would be required. He must sell enough drawings to sustain him modestly. He broached this regrettable necessity to Teevan, wishing the little man to understand that, in making a few things for money, he was guilty of no treachery to the Teevan ideal. But Teevan, much to his embarrassment, had extended the full hand of bestowal.

He was hurt when Ewing demurred; then annoyed that so petty an obstacle should retard a progress so splendid. He never dared to suspect a decadence in the resolution of his young friend.

Ewing was cut by his distress, stung by his doubt, and persuaded by his logic. He accepted Teevan's money, though not without instinctive misgiving. There were moments when he traitorously wondered if it might not be better for him to lack a friend with ideals so rigid. And more than once he suffered the disquieting suspicion of some unreality in and through it all—his intimacy with Teevan, and his desertion of a trail whose beginnings, at least, he knew. There was sometimes a faint ring of artificiality in the whole situation. Yet Teevan's heartiness and his certainty—the felicitous certainty of a star in its course—always dispelled this vague unquiet, and at last it brought Ewing a new pleasure to remember that an actual, material obligation—one increasing at measured intervals—now existed between them. [194]

He had never spoken openly to Mrs. Laithe of his intimacy with Teevan. The little man had conveyed his wish of this by indirect speech. He would have liked to tell her of the solace and substantial benefits of their comradeship, to dwell upon the shining merits of this whole-souled but modest benefactor—for Teevan caused his charge to infer that a shame of doing good openly inspired his hints—but he had, perforce, to let the praise die unspoken.

Nor did he speak often of Mrs. Laithe to Teevan, for the little man was not only bitter as to woman's influence on the life artistic, but inclined to hold the sex lightly, it seemed, in a much wider aspect. And he spoke, Ewing was sure, out of a ripe experience. He had no difficulty in detecting, under the little man's self-depreciating talk, that Teevan had ever been a power among women, and was not even yet invincibly averse to gallant adventure; not yet a man to be resisted. He was far from bluntly confessing this, but sometimes, when the brandy was low in the decanter, he would tacitly admit a romantic past; romantic, perhaps, to the point of turbulence. And once, when there was no brandy left, he spoke of specific affairs, particularly of one the breaking off of which was giving him the devil's own worry.

"Gad! She's bent on sacrificing everything for me!"

Ewing innocently murmured words about marriage as an honorable estate. [195]

"Marriage!" said Teevan, and Ewing blushed, noting his tone and the lift of his brows.

"Poor, silly, romantic fools!" sighed Teevan. "One would find it difficult to say what they see in me, I fancy."

Ewing murmured polite protestations. But less than ever did he feel moved to speak of Mrs. Laithe to the little man. It did not seem fitting. "Don Juan" had been among the verse with which the lake cabin was supplied.

Not even when Mrs. Laithe was taken off to Florida by her father did he speak her name, though he was filled with her good-by to him. There had seemed to be so much between them, and yet so little of it that could come to words. But he carried for long the last look of her eyes, and he set to his work with a new resolve. There was incentive enough. Teevan never let him forget that he required signs and miracles, like the doubting ones of old. And she—she knew he would perform them.

CHAPTER XX [196]

A LADY BLUSHES

AS the winter wore on Ewing fell into doubt and dread. Vague enough they were, but they rested on a sickening effect of emptiness, a time blank of achievement. He still regarded Teevan as quite all of the seven pillars of the house of wisdom. Yet instinct was rebelling. There were tired afternoons when he hungered to eat of the fruit of his own way.

This feeling could not but show in his occasional letters to Mrs. Laithe. She read through all his protestations of cheerfulness to the real dejection beneath them, and was both troubled and mystified, raging at his secretiveness.

When she returned to New York on a day in April and found a note from Mrs. Lowndes asking her to dine that evening, she accepted with a plan in mind. Before she saw Ewing she would try to learn something about him from Sydenham, for Sydenham would also dine with Mrs. Lowndes, and she knew that Ewing had been painting with the old man.

She found Birley the other guest, and that, too, was customary. Birley and Sydenham preserved for their hostess a certain aroma of her youth. Both had wooed her in the long ago; Sydenham in a day when Long Branch was. On its sands in the light of a July moon she had prettily hoped they might always be friends. Birley had heard her intone the same becoming sentiment at Saratoga later in the season. And both rejected ones had been present at St. Paul's on a day in the [197] following June when Kitty Folsom and Jack Lowndes had consented together in holy wedlock.

The girl's hope, perfunctory enough at the time, one may fear, had seen long years of fruition. She liked to have them at her table now. Only, when the three were alone, they remembered too vividly and became, in the silences, too fantastically unlike their aged selves to the misty eyes of one another. The one-time belle found a little of that forgetting and remembering to be salutary, so little as ensued when a fourth guest was present. And Eleanor Laithe had often been that fourth, a saving reminder of the present, to recall them when they had loitered far enough back into the old marrying years.

But she came this night with a reason beyond her wish to please. So eager was she to ask Sydenham about Ewing that she gave scant attention to the searching looks and queries of Birley when she entered the drawing room. The big man rallied her on her pallor and frailness, but with a poor spirit that hardly concealed his real misgiving. She silenced him with impatient denials of illness, but his eyes lingered anxiously on her face.

She sat at table with but half an ear for their old-time gossip, the bantering gallantries of the aged swains, and the outworn coquetries of the one-time beauty. And when they fell silent—oftener now than was their wont, for each was thinking of that other Kitty Lowndes, who had taken matters into her own hands—she forgot to make talk, silent herself for thinking on the son of that Kitty. The dinner lacked the sparkle she had been expected to give it.

As they were about to rise, after coffee, she playfully petitioned for a chat with Sydenham. [198]

"Herbert wants to smoke, and I want to sit here with him. We need a little talk together," she explained. And the other two left them, the old lady leaning on the arm of Birley.

Sydenham lighted a cigar, pushed his chair back, and faced the woman who looked eagerly at him across the disordered table, her arms along its edge, her head tilted to a questionable angle. She flew to her point.

"What about Gilbert Ewing—what trouble is he having?"

Sydenham stared vacantly. He seemed to find it necessary to translate the question into some language of his own.

"Trouble? Oh, all sorts—chrome and indigo, yellow ocher, burnt umber, rose madder, Chinese white—composition, light and shade, vanishing points. You'd have to be one of us to understand."

"Other trouble," she insisted sharply—"personal—not about his painting."

Sydenham stared again, clutching his beard in a dazed search for inspiration. He did not consider people apart from painting. It was impossible that anyone should wish to discuss Ewing except in relation to colors and canvas.

"Well, he has trouble with everything—composition, tone-values, everything."

"But something *not* painting."

He looked up at the ceiling helplessly.

"Well, I fancy Randy Teevan worries him."

"Randall Teevan!" She was amazed and alarmed at once.

"Sometimes I get the idea that Randy badgers him, though they're thick as thieves. The boy [199] wouldn't breathe if Randy said it was bad for the lungs."

"How long have they been friends?"

By quick, nervous, point-blank queries she drew from him all that he knew of this intimacy. She puzzled over it.

"Can he know?" She had not meant him to hear this, but he caught the words, and betrayed

something like human interest.

"Trust Randy for that! I found it out myself. He had Kitty's portrait—Kitty to the life—stunning brush work. Randy has begged the picture of him for a while. I fancy he didn't want it hanging there for others to see. And he found the fellow here one afternoon. Kitty told me. She was nearly taken off her feet by his story but Randy happened in and cooled things down. It's queer, Randy's setting himself to win over the chap. It's a puzzle-mix. I wonder about it sometimes when the light goes."

She had listened in consternation, a rage for battle rising in her. She was sure Teevan must have some end in view hurtful to Ewing. Yet this was cunningly hidden. She was still puzzling over this when Sydenham recalled her. He had forgotten Ewing, and studied the red light that fell across the table through a shade of silk.

"What fools we are to think of painting shadows! If heaven's the place it's said to be they'll have real shadows put in up tubes, and then—well, *think* of it!"

She laughed at him, her brief laugh, with a sigh to follow.

"We must go to the others. But, Herbert, you'll watch him as well as you can, won't you? I feel [200] responsible for him in a way."

He hesitated, but the light came. "Oh, you mean Ewing? Of course I'll watch him. I dare say he'll paint some day, after a fashion." He fumbled for the knob and awkwardly opened the door for her.

When the men went Mrs. Laithe asked if she might not linger a moment.

"Dear Aunt Kitty!" she said, going to the other's chair. "*Old* Kitty!" she repeated meaningly. The elder woman glanced quickly at her in faint alarm, half questioning, half defiant.

"Oh, Aunt Kitty! I know—I *know*! and I must talk of him. I suspected something almost from the first, and then I made sure. But I thought that perhaps no one else would find it out. And he was worth it—he is worth it. I couldn't have left him there, even if I'd been sure that everyone would know. He was a man—he had the right to live."

"My child, my child! Oh, you didn't know what you were doing! It was a monstrous thing, an impossible thing!"

"He's Kitty's son. You must feel for him."

"Feel? What haven't I felt since that day he came here?" There had been a break in her voice, but she went quietly on. "I can't make you know, dear. You've torn me—it will hurt to the end. Can you understand that in a terrible, an unspeakable way, my Kitty is still alive, is near me, and yet is not to be known? But you can't understand it. You've never had a child."

"Ah! but I've been one. I know what he would feel."

"Please, dear!" She put up a hand in protest. "As if I don't feel his hurt and Kitty's as well as mine. I shall be ground between the two every day of my life. Do you think my old arms didn't cry [201] out to be around the mother in him? But think if I had yielded! Picture his own suffering—his own shame. Can you see us meeting, our eyes falling? Even for his own sake, he must never know."

"Isn't there a way, Aunt Kitty? Some way? He's worth finding a way for." She leaned over to stroke the other's hand.

"No way, my girl. Be the world a moment, be cool. He's a nameless thing. You might know him, but nothing more. Could he make a life? Could a woman—come, face it without prejudice—could you see your own sister marry him?" Mrs. Laithe looked blank.

"You see how impossible it is. You, yourself, could *you* stand before the world with him? Could you face the shame?"

The younger woman dropped the hand she held and turned away. The elder regarded her shrewdly.

"There—you see how impossible——"

But the other faced her suddenly, clear-eyed and defiant, her head back.

"Eleanor!" It was a cry of consternation that was yet softened by tenderness, an amazed but comprehending tenderness, for the face of the younger woman was incarnadined, flagrantly, splendidly.

A moment they held each other. But there was no mistaking the thing, for, though the blush had quickly faded, an after glow lingered.

The older woman rose quickly to throw her arms about the other.

"My mad, mad child!" She stood off to search her face incredulously.

"He's alone, Aunt Kitty, and he's so defenseless. He believes in everyone more than in himself. [202] He'll be cured of that some time, but just now I'm his only defender. Others are against him or stand neutral with talk of the 'world.' I can't blame you, dear, I think you must be right for

yourself. But when he does awaken"—she narrowed her eyes on the other a moment in calculation—"then I shan't be ashamed to have him know it was always safe to believe in me—whether he was boy or man or no one at all—or less than no one. I'd never bother about names, dear—I'd never bother about names."

She smiled and drew the other close with little reassuring caresses. "You see names aren't much—the directory is full of them, and dreary enough reading they'd make. No, I'd not care for that. I'd only ask that he believe in himself as much as I believe in him, and care as little for names. And I warn you I mean to help him to that if I can."

The eyes of the other sparkled now. There was in her glance the excited admiration of a timid child who watches a reckless playmate dare some dark passage of evil repute for goblins.

"You mad—dear mad girl!" she said.

CHAPTER XXI

[203]

THE DRAMA IN NINTH STREET

EWING knew that his lady had come back. She had sent him a note the first day: "I am dining to-night with an old friend. But come to-morrow night."

The next day, while he was saying, "To-night I shall see her—actually see her...." there had come another note in her careless, scrawled writing: "I find, after all, that I shall be engaged to-night. Can you not come to-morrow night instead? I am eager for a talk with you."

"Could" he come! He laughed as he put the thing tenderly away. Could he come, indeed! Could he stay away?

But early in the evening of that same forbidden day he walked to Ninth Street, entering that thoroughfare furtively. He might not see her for another day, but at least he could look fondly at the door by which she had entered, and gaze on the stanch house that enfolded her, even on the steps that must have felt her light, quick tread, perhaps within the hour.

These things would help him to believe in her actuality—she had so come to seem but a dream lady to him.

Thrice he passed the house on the opposite side of the street. A dim light glowed through the curtained windows. Beyond them, he thought, she would be talking; laughing, perhaps; perhaps even thinking of him at that very moment as she gazed absently at some speaker who thought to [204] have her attention. If only she, too, could be counting the hours! But that was too unlikely. He warned himself not to imagine that. He recalled some of Teevan's speeches about women—"Shallow, pretty fools, for man's amusing—the Oriental alone, my boy, has a sane theory of women; creatures to be kept as choice cabinet bits—under lock and key." Poor Teevan, not to have known the one woman who could have illumined his darkness! Poor Teevan, indeed! He idly wondered if his affair—that troublesome affair of which the little man had spoken so feelingly—had been "broken off."

He slowly walked once more past the Bartell house, beholding a splendid vision of himself as he would leap up those steps the next evening. Then he continued on past Teevan's house, regarding that, also, with great kindness. He stopped a little beyond this, meaning to return. As he did so the door opened and a woman came out. He thought there was something furtive in her glance up and down the street as she paused to gather up her skirts. Then something familiar in the feminine grace of that movement chained him. Surely, but one person had ever done the thing in just that way. There could be no other. He stood staring while she came down the steps and into the light of a street lamp. It was Mrs. Laithe, walking briskly now, toward her own home. He could not mistake that free-swinging, level, deliberate stride, with the head so finely up.

He almost cried out to her in his gladness. He felt as a lost child who wildly claims its own again in some crowded street. He walked back quickly, watching her until her own door swallowed her up.

He felt a lively rejoicing. The unpromising evening had done well by him after all. Thinking but [205] to look tenderly at a house front he had veritably seen his lady—watched her with secret, unrestrained fondness. He had an impulse to follow now and demand her at the door. But he remembered in time; she would be engaged and he would see her soon. That long look was adventure enough for one night.

But he could ring Teevan's bell. That would be a fine thing to do, for Teevan had seen her. Teevan would speak of her, little knowing how his words were hungered for. He was admitted and found the little man on the hearth rug in the library, talking to himself with great animation. He showed surprise, but his welcome was warmer than usual, Ewing thought. He seated his

guest and proffered him brandy, pouring a glass for himself from a decanter almost empty. As he drank he beamed shrewdly on Ewing—kindly but shrewdly. "He must have seen her—he must have seen her ..." the little man was saying. Then a vagrant, elfish vanity smote him. He smiled inscrutably on Ewing—Ewing, who had been waiting to say lightly, "I happened to see Mrs. Laithe leaving...." But he did not say this, for the little man's smile came to life in speech.

"Gad! my boy—I'm deuced glad you came. You can make me forget a most distressing half hour I've just gone through."

The light in Ewing's eyes changed perceptibly.

"Oh, these women!" grumbled Teevan pleasantly, with the fine, humorous resignation of a persecuted gallant.

"Women—women?" muttered Ewing, slightly aghast. Teevan's heart beat blithely within his breast.

"Silly, romantic fools! What *do* they see in a man of my years?" He flourished a gesture of [206]
magnificent deprecation. "I think I once mentioned a very irksome affair—" How he blessed, now, that bit of boasting, vague and aimless at the time! "The lady, I blush to say it, becomes exigent. But I'm rightly served. Heaven knows I've seen enough of that sort of thing to know how it ends. But come"—he rose to a livelier manner—"I shouldn't bore you with a matter I'm half ashamed of, man of the world as I am. You'll sound the ennui of it, all in your own good time, when you've lost a few of those precious illusions." He broke off to ring, and directed the man to replenish the decanter.

Ewing gazed stupidly at him, failing of speech. The little man drank again when the brandy came, and Ewing wondered if he could be drunk. He feared not. The men he had known in the hills were noisy in drink—they chiefly yelled. And Teevan was quiet. If his eyes stared vacantly at intervals, if he clipped syllables from his words, and seemed to attack his speech with extreme caution, those might be only the results of his emotion. But what monstrous stuff was this he uttered! What unbelievable stuff! In a fever of apprehension he wondered what Teevan would say next.

But the little man dismissed woman, dismissed her with an exquisite shrug, to speak of his young friend's work, and of painting at large.

"A suggestion of the true manner in that late thing of yours, my boy, really, a hint of Dupré, and he was a colorist of the first rank. And there are fewer colorists, genuine masters of tone, than you'd think. Turner was one, to be sure, but Millet had a restricted sense of color. Corot was great only within a narrow range. Rousseau was only a bit broader, robuster. There's a [207]
wretchedly defective color sense in many of the old masters, and in heaven knows how many of the young ones. France must take the blame for that, I'm sure you'd agree with me. The academic sentiment there runs to form and against color. They insist that colorists do little work. It's not an unplausible sophism. One has only to begin counting to see that—counting the host of little niggling, mechanical stipplers it's responsible for. It's true, color has its pitfalls and its gins. There's a temptation to shirk form. Many an aspiring colorist has become at last a mushy mannerist, as vicious in his influence as the chaps who never get beyond smart drawing and clever grouping." The little man was "squeezing" his eyes now as if he judged a row of paintings. He talked on and drank frequently.

But Ewing left as soon as he could do so. Teevan pressed his hand with rare cordiality at parting, as if Ewing were one person in the world still worthy of belief. He wandered blindly home, awkwardly trying to mold this new chaos into an understandable scheme of things. He fell instinctively back on his studies of the drama.

Many nights he had sat before the painted curtain to feast a questing mind on the life it lifted to reveal. He had found its revelations more intimate, more specific, than those of the life outside, and he had seemed to learn many things. Lacking this study he would not have divined that actual men and women might be leading lives of domestic adventure, of romantic vicissitude, of sinister intrigue, lives crowded with love and hate and fear and a thousand lawless complexities.

He had studied the street crowds in the light thus thrown on their inner motives. It had been a [208]
fine thing to detect the plotting scoundrel under the placid, dissembling mask of some fellow who bought an evening paper and boarded a street car with elaborate airs of innocence; to probe the secret of the unhappy wife whose white face stared blankly from a passing brougham; to identify the handsome but never culpable hero, unconscious of third-act toils tightening about him; to know the persecuted heroine, or the manly but comic chap who loved her with exquisite restraint, divining that she could never be his.

But, though he had stripped the masks from these mummers in the street crowds, and read their secrets of guilt or innocence, he had not supposed that the people he actually knew could be leading lives complicated in that way. And if Teevan had talked, then Teevan must have been drunk. He would see her to-morrow night, and she would speak casually of her call at Teevan's upon some trifling errand.

Yet, when night came again and he stood in her presence, the first devouring look at her shocked him momentarily out of all thought of Teevan's maunderings. She was drooping and

wasted and flatly pale. He scarcely knew her face, with the eyes burning at him from black rings. He took her hand, nursing it gently, standing helpless and hurt before her.

"You are so changed," he said fearfully, "so changed! Oh, you are so changed!"

But she laughed with her familiar gayety, tossing her head in denial. He still scanned her face. Some resemblance there, some sinister memory of her look on another face, was stirring him. He could almost remember what it meant. At last her eyes fell before his and she drew her hand [209] quickly away.

"Really, I won't have any talk of myself. I hear too much of that. I'm a bit run down, that's all. We found Florida enervating. Even dad was affected by it and forgot his philosophy. So, an end to that. I must hear of you, of your work."

She sat down, drawing a white scarf about her shoulders, and leaning toward him in the old inviting way.

"Tell me what you have done—everything there is to tell about it."

All at once he remembered.

"Last night," he began uneasily—"I wanted to see you last night—"

"You couldn't have seen me last night." She smiled in a way that brought out all the weak, wasted look of her face. "I was busy—I was trying to adjust something that has troubled me more than I can tell you."

He stared at her, incredulous, believing he could not have heard.

"... an affair that has worried me," she repeated, noticing his blank look.

Stupefied as he was, he felt a great pity rush over him, an instant longing to be her knight and give battle for her—to be her squire, if she herself must be knight. Yet, if Teevan had spoken truly must it not be a thing in which he was powerless to help her ever so little? A sudden sickness of rage came over him at thought of Teevan. He had almost made a jest of her.

He could not talk of himself after that. She could get nothing from him of his own worries, though she could see that he had these in abundance. At last she tired of striving against him and [210] let him go, out of sheer longing for the touch of his hand at parting. He had regarded her with a moody, almost savage tenderness that made her weak.

As he walked home he felt new to the streets again. They were strange streets in a strange world. But one thing he was sure of; one thing stood clearly out of the puzzle: he must not intrude, must not bother her; must not see her often. In a drama so alien to him he could not act without direction. He knew his own longing too well to trust himself. He sat a long time with his arms clasped across his breast. The anguish in it seemed physical; it was as if a beast were devouring his heart.

CHAPTER XXII [211]

A REVOLT

HE turned furiously to his work, but, as the summer came on, he realized that he was working with a desperation entirely heartless. He was not only sure, now, that he had taken a wrong road, but that nameless distress of his lady had left his desire benumbed. A fountain had gone dry in him.

At the beginning of the warm days he went into the country on sketching trips with Sydenham. To vales and little rivers north of the city, to flat, green stretches on Long Island, to the Jersey hills, they had gone with sketch traps wherever trolley or steam car could find Nature quickly for them.

Ewing had looked forward to this. He had felt hampered in the studio, where he must pass whole days in futile messing with colors, in rash trials of this or that trick of tint, like an idling schoolboy playing with slate and pencil. Once in the open, he had felt, there would quickly show forth those gifts which Teevan was certain he possessed.

But day by day these excursions with the old painter had brought him to believe that he had lost his way. That trick of color was not to be learned, it was clear, by rough-and-ready advances. Teevan, who was ever watchful of him, who betrayed, indeed, a strange little jealousy of any other influence than his own, scanned his first studies eagerly, and turned an inscrutable face on [212] his young friend. He did not praise loosely; he did not condemn outright. And he talked not too specifically of the canvases before him. He showed little consciousness of a change in the

demeanor of his disciple, though Ewing's eye rested on him with a long, unaccountable regard. Perhaps the boy was turning a little sullen. This amused him. Meanwhile, the youth stood aghast before the dreadful thing he saw in his heart. Hatred of a benefactor! All the good in him struggled against it; all his gratitude pleaded with him to be fair to the friend he had revered so long. Teevan talked more of Corot or Constable, Diaz or Millet than he talked of Ewing; and the young man came at last to the amazing conclusion not only that he was on a wrong road, but that Teevan knew it—that the little man must long have known it. This put him again in that rage of impotence that had seized him in those last days at the League. But he bore it longer now. He felt there was something final about this.

There were long days in the open to think on it, weigh it, and wring the meaning from it. Sydenham placidly criticised his work; but Sydenham could not feel his tragedy of defeat. A man who, at seventy, suffered his own despairs with the poignant ecstasy of youth, could not take a boy's failings seriously. Ewing now saw, moreover—for he was beginning to use another pair of eyes than Teevan's—that Sydenham himself was a hopeless mannerist, a color-mad voluptuary, painting always subjectively, refusing all but the merest hints from his subject.

His last day of confessed futility, his last hour of inner rebellion, came early in June. He carried his sketch trap out that day, but did not unpack it. He lay, instead, pondering, resolving, raging, [213] while Sydenham, a little distance off, delicately corrected the errors of Nature in a vista of meadow. Ewing chewed the juicy ends of long-stemmed grasses and made phrases of disparagement for this sketch of Sydenham's, picturing himself with the courage to utter them. He told himself frankly what he thought of the old man's work—his "brush doddering," he nerved himself to call it.

Immensely refreshed by this exercise in brutality, he rolled over on his grassy bed to follow the shade of the oak under which he lay, and dramatized a meeting with Teevan, in which the little man strangely listened more than he spoke. He uttered his mind again concerning the work of Sydenham, the master Teevan had prescribed, asserting that unsuspecting toiler to be hopelessly "locoed" in the matter of color. He saw Teevan's fine brows go elegantly up at this term, and he explained it to him with a humble sort of boldness.

From this he warmed to sheer audacity, disclosing further to his imagined hearer that the time had come for him to go his own way—still grateful for advice, still yearning for that friendly intimacy, but determined to be done with dreams. He saw Teevan applauding this mild declaration of revolt, with his fine, dark little smile, and a courteous inclination of the head, and he thereupon amplified it. He must go back to himself and stay there stubbornly, wheresoever that self led him. Millet might have a restricted sense of color, Corot might have had his faults, and Rousseau have been less than Teevan could have wished him; but these were dead men. And Ewing was alive, determined to do those things that permitted him to feel the little power he might have. He was through with efforts that brought him nothing but a sense of the folly of all [214] effort. And it was to this conviction, he made it plain, that his amazed but still respectful listener had led him. He worked himself into a glow of defiant self-assertion, feeling his own respect, and Teevan's as well, mounting with his heat.

When the light faded he strolled over to look at Sydenham's sketch, bent on testing his self-inspired temerity.

"I wonder if you've gotten that sky?" he began judicially, as the old man invited his comment. Sydenham looked up in some surprise, but Ewing's eyes were still on the sketch.

"Too gray above, isn't it? I thought the gray was only down near the horizon. By the way, I wish I'd roughed in that cow for you. A cow isn't the easiest thing in the world to draw. They look easy, but they're not. That bit of stone wall isn't bad, and your clover effect is first rate." He paused. He had meant only to practice speaking his own mind against the next interview with Teevan. He did not want to hurt Sydenham. The latter was roping his stool and easel together. He had been a little amazed at his pupil's outburst, but he looked up with a smile entirely placid.

"That's the way they all say it. You've caught the trick of art criticism, my boy, if you've caught nothing else."

Ewing saw that he was laughed at. There was a cool little flash to his retort.

"I can make that into a real cow for you, if you like, after we get home."

But the old man only chuckled at him, making him regret that he had ever so little curbed his criticism. He had an impulse to fight, a craving to arouse resistance. But he saw that Sydenham [215] was no target for him, save in a sort of subcaliber practice. He hoped this novel combativeness would not wither under the first glance of Teevan's sharp little eyes.

It was dusk when they reached the city, and Ewing went to the Monastery to dine. He had long shunned the place, for the men there talked of things they had done or were doing, and they had made him, without meaning to, feel "out of it," as he told himself. For he, if he talked, could tell only of wonders he meant to do, and, lacking an audience composed of Teevans, he was shrewd enough to see that these would sound too wonderful and the future too distantly vague.

He had always been glad, however, of his drawing on the east wall. They could not believe him wholly lacking after that, nor refuse him fellowship if he sought it. He avoided the crowd when he entered the room—the men he knew best were at a long table on the rear veranda just outside

the open windows—and chose a small table opposite his drawing. He had thought of it often during the afternoon while he harangued Teevan in imagination. It had occurred to him that this was the only thing he had really done since coming to New York, and he had been seized with a longing to look at it again, to prove to his own eyes that the thing which was really his own—not Corot's nor Millet's nor even Sydenham's—was not an inconsiderable thing, not a thing he need despair of building on.

As he ate, his eyes eagerly retraced the lines. After the soup he had to look down to his plate to know if his fork brought him fish or flesh. The sketch delighted him. He was surprised that he had been able to do it. He began to doubt his present mastery of the technique it displayed, [216] fearing he had wandered too long in the Teevan-prescribed maze, dawdled too long in the little man's palace of illusions. One thing he knew: he would not dare mount a table and try another such drawing before them all. He had done this one as unthinkingly as he would have saddled a horse or sighted a rifle, indifferent to observers. It rushed upon him sickeningly that all his association with Teevan had tended to destroy his belief in himself. The coffee found him afraid—ragingly afraid.

The voices from the group outside came to him murmurously, and at intervals he would listen to the careless, bantering talk. One voice related that its wielder had smoked opium in Cairo. He heard cries of mock horror, and the drawl of Chalmers—"Cairo—that's where the 'streets' come from." Griggs was presently extolling some ancient and wonderful sherry. "Great stuff! You take a sip and you don't swallow it—it just floats off through your being like a golden mist. He only has about a dozen bottles—out of a lot that was put down for Napoleon or somebody in 1830." Baldwin's voice floated in: "All right, old man, but they had to put it down a long way to reach Napoleon in 1830."

There was a laugh at this, and it came to the lone listener as the care-free echo of a world he had tried for and lost. Lost thus far—but there was farther to go, other days to live, other wise men to counsel with. He could have believed it heartily, if it were not for that thought of Mrs. Laithe, the thought that was always like a beast devouring his heart. Meantime, if he could only have a breathing spell, some days of quiet. He wished his own hills were not so far away. He was [217] sure that a little time back in the cabin studio would give him his old bearings.

His thought ran to Mrs. Laithe's brother, who had come to town the week before, bronzed and bearded and violent with enthusiasm for his Western life. He decided that a talk with Bartell would be tonic to his mood; the bare mention of familiar names and places would hearten him—of the Wimmenuche and Bar-7, Old Baldy and Dry Fork. And perhaps he had seen Ben lately; the two might even have driven down to Pagosa together.

And it would be an excuse for seeing her. For two months he had sought her only thus, with something he could hold in his mind as an excuse, for he was abashed by that nameless thing that troubled her, and troubled, as well, the little man who had meant so much to him—for Teevan, when the brandy was low, continued to speak of women.

He walked quickly round to the house in Ninth Street, where he asked for Bartell. But only Mrs. Laithe was at home. This embarrassed him, great as was his solicitude for her. She had sought his confidence more than once of late, but he could not tell her of doubts only half defined, of fears vague to absurdity, of anxieties that might well be baseless. He thought that now he could have talked, finding her alone, but for once she seemed rather curiously preoccupied. They sat together in the library with only a half light, the two windows opened for random breezes. Suddenly, as her face was toward him, dim though the light was, he caught the look that had troubled him so hauntingly in the spring. He knew that look now; it was the look he had seen on his father's face in the last year of his life—the look of a spirit divesting itself of the [218] flesh.

"You *are* ill," he said, trying to speak lightly under his sudden alarm. "Let me have a better look at you." He turned the light to a full blaze. Her wonted paleness was warmed to a sinister flush about the eyes and the upper face, and, though her eyes flashed bravely at him in denial, the bones were sharp above her hollowed cheeks, and her once rounded chin had become lean. She shivered as she spoke.

"I'm a little exhausted by the heat; nothing more. Lower the light, please. I don't care to be studied just now."

"But I know you're not well. You ought to go off some place. Get out to pasture at once. You've been 'over-packed,' kept too long on the trail."

"You, too? They all say it. It's so easy to say."

"And easy to do."

"It's hard to do, and yet I'm afraid I must. I've felt that I ought to be here with my charges—you have been one of them." She brightened with a sudden inspiration. "You need rest yourself. Your face shows it. You've been depressed a long time, you are worried now. Let us both rest. My aunt up at Kensington has wanted me there—the aunt my sister is with. She'd be glad to have you as well. It's a big house and she likes young people. There! Will you go with me?"

She rose, waiting, electrified, for his answer. Instantly he felt that he wished this above all things. There he could find himself, fortify his soul for any number of Teevans—perhaps fortify

her own.

"I'll go," he answered heartily. "It will be good for us both."

She fell into her chair with a long "Ah!" then she gave the purring little laugh, like that of a [219]
child made happy. "We shall go for two blessed weeks and forget this place with its wretched tangles."

"I'm your man!" he said, rising and taking her hand with his old boyish enthusiasm. "Can we start early?"

She kept her hand in his while she laughed again. "The train goes from the Grand Central at one. I'll wire Aunt Joyce."

Outside Ewing met Bartell, but he did not talk of the San Juan.

"You must see to your sister," he said. "She looks the way my father did. You ought to get her out of here. She's going off for two weeks, but that won't set her right. Go look at her!"

Bartell found his sister where Ewing had left her.

"Well, Nell, how is it now? What did Birley say?"

She stirred impatiently in her chair. "He wouldn't commit himself. He told me to rest away from here for two weeks and then come back to see a specialist he'd send me to, a man who knows—such things."

"I just met Ewing—he spoke of how badly you look. I'm worried, Nell. You're not going to be left here."

"I must tell you something, dear—oh, a ghastly joke, if ever there was one: You know that one death trap of a tenement I've had so much trouble with——"

"Where all those consumptives were? Yes."

"They've died there like sheep. I had it inspected—I wanted to have the owner compelled to build it over or something, but we always found that the law had been cunningly met with—not the spirit of it, but the letter. The airshafts and drains were bad enough to kill, but not bad enough to hurt the owner. Yesterday I determined to find out who the owner was, to make a [220]
personal appeal. I was willing to buy the place myself."

She stopped in a fit of coughing, a dry, hard, tearing cough that left her exhausted.

"Well, Sis?"

"I went to the agents—this will make you cry or laugh; I did both—and I found they were my agents—the house was my house."

"Poor Sis!"

"One of those Dick left—*mine*, you understand. I've been spending the blood of those people, eating, wearing, amusing myself with it."

"Yes, and going down there to get caught in the same trap. I don't see anything funny about that."

"Alden Teevan would. I must tell him of it—my own dungeon closing in on me."

"Nonsense! You're morbid, girl. Tenements have got to be dirty. Trinity Church itself has a fine bunch of the worst kind."

"I'm not a church, dear. This tenement is coming down. I gave orders to-day."

"Well, you stay away from it. You're in bad shape, my girl."

"Two weeks at Kensington will put me right."

"Two weeks nothing! See here, if you act up, I'll rope you and hustle you out to the ranch and close herd you there for about six months."

She smiled weakly at him.

"I shall be all right, dear—but you can help me upstairs now."

"Too tired for a roof garden?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Or a broiled lobster?"

"Not to-night, dear." [221]

He helped her up the stairs, alternately scolding her for her weakness and protesting that broiled lobsters were all that kept him from forgetting the existence of Manhattan.

CHAPTER XXIII

[222]

THE LITTLE LAND

EWING found Kensington like a village dropped from the clouds of stageland, its wide, grass-bordered streets arched with giant elms and flanked by square old houses, drowsing behind their flower gardens and green lawns. The house to which he went was equally a stage house. Only in that land of pretense had he seen its like: a big, square, gray house, its drab slate roof and red chimneys all but hidden by the elms that towered above it like mammoth feather dusters, its wide piazzas screened from the street by a hoary hedge of lilac. The house seemed to drowse in a comfortable lethargy, confident of the rectitude of builders long dead who had roughhewn its beams and joined them with wooden pins before a day of nails. In Ewing's own room, far up between the hunched shoulders of the house, the windows gave closely on one of the elms, so that he could hear its whispers night and morning from his canopied bed of four posts. The other rooms were broad and low of ceiling, and there were long, high-backed sofas, slim-legged chairs, and tables of mahogany or rosewood, desks, cabinets, and highboys of an outlandish grace, that charmed with hints of a mellowed past—of past overlaying past in sleeping strata.

The woman whose house this was seemed to Ewing to be its true spirit. She, too, drowsed anciently, a thing of old lace and lavender, yet of a certain gentle and antique sprightliness, of cheeks preserving a hint of time-worn pink, mellowed like the scrap of her flowered wedding dress shut between the leaves of an "Annual" half a century old.

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And Ewing found in the house, too, the girl who had once talked half an hour with him by an exigent tea table. She had been a thing of shy restraint then, showing with an almost old-fashioned simplicity against her background of townish sophistication. Now he found her demurely modern in this huddle of mellowed relics. She it was who interpreted for him the antique mysteries of house and town. She paraded before him the treasures of her aunt, from the pewter plates and silver-gilt candelabra to camphor-scented brocades long hidden in cedar chests in the ghostly attic. But she performed her office with irreverence; as when, in the attic's gloom, she held the festal gown of some departed great-grandmother before her own robust figure to show how tiny were grandmothers in those days, for the yoke but a little more than half spanned her breadth as she smirked above it in scorn of its narrowness.

In that subdued light the girl's skin was flawless, her eyes were shaded to murkiness, and a mote-ridden shaft of sunlight struck her hair to a radiant yellow. But out of doors these matters could be seen to another effect. The hair was only a yellowish brown, the eyes lost their shadows and became the lucid green of sea waves, and the face was spotted with tiny freckles, like a bird's egg. He liked her best out of doors, breathing as she did of wood and field and sky. Skirts she seemed to wear under protest, as a wood nymph might humor, a little awkwardly, the prejudice of an indoor tribe with which she chose to tarry. When she raced over the lawn with her dog, it was not hard to see that clothing was an ungraceful impediment, even the short-skirted gowns she wore by day. In the longer affairs of evening, though she strove to subdue her spirits to them, she still had an air of the open, as if she but played at being a lady and might forget at any moment. Ewing was shyer of her when evening brought this change of habit. At such times he found it easier to talk to Mrs. Laithe, who sat—or, oftener, lay—with her eyes turned from the light, speaking but little.

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"I'm glad to be away from town," she said to him, as he sat a moment beside her one day, "and I'm glad you're away. I need to be quiet, and you shall do as you like. Virginia will go about with you and make you gay. Virginia always makes us gay."

Unconsciously her hand had fallen on his sleeve, curling and fastening there, and when he rose he was disturbed to see that he had shaken off so tender a thing.

"I didn't know you were holding me," he said, in apology, and lifted the fallen hand.

"Such foolish hands! Your sister's are tiny, too, but they look as if they could turn a doorknob." He leisurely turned it this way and that to see its lines, and compared the fingernails with his own to show how absurd they were. And all the time it seemed to the woman that her hand had a little heart in it that was beating to suffocation.

"There, Virginia is beckoning to you from the path—perhaps you can finish my hand another time." She laughed. "I hope you're not seriously annoyed about it."

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"It's foolish," he insisted, and replaced it with elaborate care. Then he ran to join his ruddy cicerone. He found the girl a good comrade, who helped him to forget those things he wished to forget. Somehow in the quiet air, that nameless secret thing that had been eating his heart drew off a little. Almost he could believe it had all been some hideous mistake.

He tried at first to join Virginia in her sports. Tennis looked foolishly easy, but after sending four of the balls beyond recovery he suspected that the game might demand something more than willingness and strength, and relinquished his racquet to watch the girl. He felt the glow of

the sport in following her swift movements, and he envied the young men who could play with her.

Golf looked not only easy but useless; and it was with only half a heart that he essayed it. He splintered a driver at his first attempt, and he did not venture a second. Still, he liked golf better than tennis, he decided, for he could carry the bag of things she played with and hunt lost balls, and wander over the course alone with her. He was never able to believe that a stroke more or less in holing the ball could be a matter of real moment, but the girl was worth watching while she believed it. He had never seen a real girl near before, and he was surprised to find it so fine a sight.

In the canoe he was more successful, contriving to accomplish by sheer strength of arm what the girl did more adroitly. They would paddle far up the little river, to float down in the late afternoon. The river, too, was a stage river, running between low, willow-fringed banks, or winding among hay fields that sloped back to the upland, or lush green meadows where cows were posed effectively. The girl became part of the picture when they turned to float homeward, [226] facing him from the bow, her hair glinting yellow and her skin crystal clear against the crimson cushion she leaned upon.

They rode together, too—he could join her there—over the upland and far into the little hills, between tangled hedge rows, past little farms with orchards of ripening fruit. They passed many deserted places, mournful in their stagnation, overgrown with wild things, the houses forlornly dismantled, perhaps with the roof sunken, the chimney toppled, and the weather-beaten walls in ruinous decay. He was touched by these places. The houses must have been built with high hope, and once have been alive with full-hearted effort. Their walls had enclosed dreams and joyous dramas. Then discouragement had fallen and the search for another place of beginning. He wondered what had become of all the people who had built these homes. He hoped they had begun in another place with undimmed resolve and had found peace. Yet there were sinister hints that their ghosts haunted these spots of their first failures, beseeching of the ruins something of the first freshness of impulse.

He tried to tell Virginia Bartell that he, too, was like a deserted farm, falling into ruin. But this only made her laugh. She could not believe in failure, it seemed. And he laughed with her, after a little. It was not possible, after all, to suppose that he could go on being a ruin forever. These frustrated home makers must have succeeded at last, and so would he. In some manner the girl herself became an assurance of this. Her mere buoyancy uplifted him.

These times alone with the girl were not always to be had for the asking. There abounded other [227] youths who prized her companionship; able, dauntless youths and skilled with accomplishments.

There was one of these, a tall young man, spectacled, of a high shiny forehead, a student of a youth, who haunted the gray house like a malignant wraith of erudition, and condescended to the girl almost as flagrantly as he did to Ewing. His talk, whether of machinery or morals, socialism or chemistry, was meant to instruct. Wherefore the girl slunk from him, not always so skilfully as might have been wished—with far less subtlety, indeed, than her aunt wished.

"I'm almost certain you offended him this afternoon," she remarked on a day when they had fled flagrantly to the river, "though why you should wish to avoid him is beyond me. You know that he's from one of the very oldest families in West Roxbury." The girl's tone was penitent as she answered: "But I'd promised to go in the canoe with Mr. Ewing." There was no penitence, however, in the look she flashed at Ewing over her aunt's shoulder, daring him to prove if he were a man. He nerved himself in the glance.

"But you see, Mrs. Ranley, I'm from one of the very oldest families in Hinsdale County, Colorado." The girl applauded him with her eyes, and the incident was closed with a word of mild gratification from the old lady. She was pleased to observe that he felt a family pride, even though any county in Colorado was, of course, beyond consideration.

Their favorite walk home from the golf links led them through a churchyard, and here they often rested in the cool of the afternoon; not in the new part where monument and mound were obtrusively recent, but up the hill from these, where death was so ancient as to be touched with [228] the grace of the antique. Here, in a pleasant gloom of oak shade, cypress and elm, they loitered among the drab stones that headed mounds worn down and overgrown with sweetbrier, wild rose, and matted grass; and here Mrs. Laithe sometimes joined them for the homeward stroll, walking too much, Ewing thought, like one who had risen from the forgotten multitude under foot. Yet, when he spoke of her health she always responded with her gay assurances, and seemed, indeed, to be more concerned about his welfare than her own. He had not been able to talk to her freely. There was so much about Teevan that he felt she would not understand. Besides, he could not speak to her about Teevan.

At the end of the first week he had written to Teevan to say that he must talk with him. The little man had replied from his favorite sea place, naming a day when he would be back in town.

The prospect depressed Ewing anew. It had been easy to lie on his back in a field, nettled by disgust with himself, and frame speeches of self-mastery. But reflection had brought him doubt. The speeches would have to be made, and yet, in a way, he was Teevan's property; Teevan had invested money in him. This added to his depression. And this was why the girl reported him to her sister as a youth joyful in odd moments of forgetting, but sunk in some black despair when he remembered; a young man she could not at all understand. And Mrs. Laithe, puzzling over his

trouble, divining that Teevan would somehow be at the bottom of it, determined on a move to aid him, a move that would take her once more to Teevan himself. She had sought him the night after [229] her talk with Sydenham, but the interview had come to nothing. Teevan had been so plausibly solicitous about Ewing's success that she had found herself unready to tax him with a knowledge of Ewing's identity, or with motives inimical to him. His excessive amiability, his air of unsuspecting sincerity, had disarmed her. But this time, she determined, there would be no more fencing. She would attack straightforwardly.

The day they left the girl lightly bade Ewing farewell with talk of meetings in town. He had not told her of a resolve formed the day before when they had ridden to a hill above the village from which they could see veritable mountains in the distance—his own delectable mountains they had seemed, calling to him. Instantly he had determined to go back to his own. Not in defeat, but for fresh courage. He would stay there working as he could, until Teevan was paid. Then the Rookery would know him again, and the men of the Monastery—know him going his own way.

He was meditating gloomily on his retreat as the train bore him back to town with Mrs. Laithe. And she, alive to the distress that showed in his face, forgot everything but him, the one she had helplessly and irrevocably taken for her own, half her entreating child, half her master, terrible and beloved. She watched his face from half-closed eyes, finding it unutterably sad, and, without her being able to withhold it, her mind constantly repeated the image of an embrace, to soothe and sustain him. Incessantly this unsubstantial enfoldment took place in her inner sense, like some wild drama among ocean-bed things, far below an unrippled surface. Over and over the phantom woman beat down his enemies, encircled him from harm, consoled him against her [230] heart, cherished him like the dear walls of a home. And she could not halt this phantom play. Once she divided her arms and raised them a little, as one in a dream faintly acts his vision. Ewing thought she was drawing her chiffon boa about her, and he replaced it on her shoulders.

Floating about this obsession in her mind was the dismayed thought of Teevan. She was fixed on going to him for the truth, and this disturbed her like a coming battle. She was not used to the feeling of antagonism, she, with her gentle woman's life, but she felt an unknown energy welling up in her—the fierceness of the defender. She would have the truth from Teevan.

CHAPTER XXIV [231]

EWING INTERRUPTS

ELEANOR Laithe started from a half sleep. She had begun to dream while still conscious of the library walls, the couch on which she lay, the curtains swelling in and out of the opened windows with a heated breeze of late afternoon, the rattle of a wagon through the street, and the shrilling of boys at a game.

She turned her face from the wall, fixed the pillows more easily under her head, and stared into the room, her eyes narrowing in calculation as she went lucidly back for the hundredth time since she had flung herself there, to check off the details of that half hour with the man who healed—or did not heal.

She had shrewdly rejected the specialist Birley had named for another who would not know her. She wanted no mistaken kindness, no polite reluctance or glossing, and she feared to find this in one who might regard her as something more than a casual human body in evil case. She had felt bound to have plain words. She would know what she faced as one knows heat or cold.

And she had gained the full of her wish. The man had taken her as casually as she offered herself. His questions were few, his examination mechanically impersonal, his diagnosis cool and informing. She had felt herself a culprit, listening to sentence.

"You think I have a year to live?" [232]

"Longer, perhaps, if you take it this way, without worry. Worry eats the tissue even faster than those little vegetable parasites. I take it you eliminate worry?" He drew on his gloves.

She smiled now, with pride in her cunning. Her simulation of unconcerned curiosity had been perfect, as if it were another's wasting body she brought him. She had hidden all that fond love of life, her life of action, sensation; of hope ever enlarging, of fruitions certain, innumerable, and dear. No sign had the practiced eyes read of the inner rage that maddened her at thought of so much life unlived—life of mirth and tears, height and depth, grief, ecstasy and common levels. She was avid of them all, dared them all, wished only to play the game, vaunting a fine zest for the sport with all its hazards.

She had found in her hour alone there that she did not fear death—only detested it. She feared it as little as a child fears sleep; hated it as a child, torn untimely from play, hates to go to bed.

"Longer, perhaps, if you take it this way—eliminate worry." But she knew she could not take it "this way;" could not give up as this judge believed she had done. She must rebel to the last. As long as she played she must play in the true spirit. She might be vanquished, but she would not debase the sport. She smiled at a reminiscence of her brother's college life, catching at a phrase. "It seems I'm not a 'quitter,'" she thought.

Then she halted this race of thought in sudden amusement. She felt her evening fever rising, [233]
the sinister warmth and false glow that burned like a red flame below the outer corners of her eyes. It had come earlier than usual, hurried, doubtless, by the very passion of her rebelling. The man had been right. But she would have no waiting, half-hearted conflict, for all that.

She sat up quickly. A certain battle was set for this day, one that would test her gameness. She rose to look at a clock, and knew that Teevan probably awaited Ewing. But she could be first there, and she felt equal to the clash. The very fever would sustain her. And she would be wary once more that day, cunning to learn what she had to oppose. Then she would be valiant. If the fever only gave her strength, small matter the fuel that fed it.

She smoothed her hair, flung a scarf over her shoulders, and stepped out into the early twilight. She felt a slight giddiness as she walked the short distance to Teevan's door, but she had shrugged this away by the time she rang the bell. There was a wait, and she rang again. Then, when she began to fear that she assailed an empty house, she heard rapid steps; the door swung back, and Teevan himself stood before her, Teevan jaunty in summer negligee of flannels and silken shirt, who deftly covered with his froth of gallantry whatever surprise he felt at sight of her.

"My dear lady! So neighborly of you, and what luck I was in! I'm off Neville's yacht for the evening only on a bit of business. Come up to my den. It's stifling down here."

She followed him up the stairs, feeling a reckless strength for combat. He took her to a room at the front of the house where there was a desk, a few lounging chairs, and an air of mannish comfort.

"I'll not keep you long, Randall," she said, hesitating at first to sit, illogically fearing that [234]
weakness might seize her if she relaxed her body. After a moment, however, she took the chair he pushed forward.

"As long as you like, Eleanor. The breeze comes cooler through those south windows while you're here. Let me offer you a brandy and soda. No? You'll let me take this alone, then? Thanks! I'm feeling a bit done up by the heat." He seated himself at the desk, sipped from his glass and looked a question at her. She debated her beginning.

"It's about Gilbert Ewing."

His dark little eyes narrowed upon her with agreeable interest.

"Ah, to be sure—Ewing."

"You know he's been staying a fortnight with us at Kensington."

He nodded a gracious assent, still waiting, still veiled with an effect that aroused all her caution.

"He came back to town yesterday."

"He must have enjoyed the place immensely. I'm nowhere so strongly reminded of rural England, saving the architecture, of course. Ewing painted, doubtless?"

"Oh, no, he did nothing. He played with my sister, chiefly. Virginia took him about. They were inseparable. He had heart for nothing but her—no work, nothing else." She had deliberately lengthened the speech, wishing him not to see that she watched for an opening. Teevan seemed to feel a leading. He searched her face as he asked:

"They liked each other immensely, eh?"

"Oh, yes, I couldn't tell you——"

He felt the weariness of her tone, almost a faintness. The color burned darkly high on her [235]
cheeks, her eyes showed an exotic and painful splendor. He suddenly saw that she must have sustained some blow; that her luster was a fevered glitter sad and terrible, and that she was nerving herself to some ordeal. He sank back in his seat, all acuteness. Had she betrayed herself in the beginning, struck open the secret for him by her first words? A jealous woman, then—a flouted woman come to turn on the man? It was no conclusion to leap at; rather a piquant suspicion to verify.

He set his glass down and picked up a slender-bladed dagger from the desk before him, absently bending the steel. He knew they were both veiled for the moment. His eyes challenged her to open speech of Ewing as he held the dagger up to her and said lazily, "A beauty, that—undoubted Toledo work. Picked it up in a shop at Newport yesterday. They knew how to temper steel in those days. See its edge—" He tore a bit of paper from a pad and slashed it into strips, his eyes rising to hers at each cut, interrogatory, through the complacence of a man exhibiting a fine property.

"Randall, you've been friendly with him, and yet you know who he is; you've known it a long time. And you—you *can't* like him."

He still toyed with his plaything, prickling its needle-like point into the pad of paper under his hand. Then he turned on her with a sudden, insinuating droop of the eyelids.

"Very well—and you've been friendly with him, say until two weeks ago. And you're no longer so. I name no reason. But you detest him now. Am I wrong? Can I still read a woman?" He leaned toward her, peering nearer with each query. He meant them to be like thrusts of the dagger [236] which he now threw on the desk. Her eyes fell in unfeigned confusion under his look, her mind running many ways to come on the meaning beneath this preposterous guess. She looked up to him, seeking a hint, but his eyes were inscrutable, his mouth set in a sagacious smile, intimating, accusing. She looked down again, suddenly feeling it wise to let him think as he did—whatever absurd thing it might be. She sighed deeply, relaxed in her chair and met his eyes again. Teevan beheld a woman defenseless to his insight; one too proud to confess in words, but too weak, too vindictive, perhaps, to attempt denial.

"I see, my girl—don't trouble to speak." He replenished his glass from the decanter. He was delighted with his penetration; pleased, also, to believe that here was an ally, if one should be needed. He glanced at her again. She sat silent and drooping.

"You did well to come to me, Eleanor. I fancy you'll be interested to know what our young friend is about to encounter."

"Oh, I shall, I shall! Tell me, please." He smiled at her eagerness, so poorly subdued, recording in a mental footnote the viperish fury of a woman in her plight. Still, he thought she carried it off rather well. There had been need for his keenness to read her secret.

"I'll tell you, my girl, and I'm jolly glad to find some one who can enjoy it with me. What am I going to do with him?" He rose and paced the room for so long a time that she felt she could not bear it. She was about to speak when he abruptly halted and faced her with a petrifying burst of malignance. "What am I going to do with him?—wring him, wreck him, choke him, fling the fool [237] back on his dung heap to rot!" She stared at him, panting; then, summoning all her ingenuity she smiled slowly above the sickening fear that had rushed over her. Teevan glowed. That smile of hers—he could detect something relentless in it—was a tribute to his prowess no less than a confirmation of his power to read her.

"I don't understand," she half whispered, still with that restrained fierceness that gave him joy.

"Of course you don't. Am I to be read as a primer? I'm subtler, I trust, than an earthquake, a cyclone, a deluge. You don't understand, but you shall." He paced the floor again with a foppish air of pride. "Ah, it has worked so beautifully. Really, I've regretted there was no one I could let in to enjoy a work of art with me. But you, I see, will have the taste to applaud it, Nell, now that your eyes are opened. Oh, the thing has gone ideally! Only applause was lacking."

"I don't understand, Randall." She could hardly manage the words. She was afraid her heart would beat them into some wild cry of impatience.

"You shall—you shall." He gazed meditatively at her. "Yes, and you'll have to know it all to understand perfectly, even my—my humiliation." He unlocked the door of a closet and brought out something she did not recognize until he had placed it across the arms of a chair and stepped back. It was the portrait of Ewing's mother. His face was contorted now in a most unpleasant sneer.

"There's the *motif*." He resumed his seat at the desk, facing the picture. The sneer had gone, and whatever dignity of soul was in him sounded in the next words.

"You can't know what that meant to me when I saw it, when I knew who had done it, when I [238] thought of the creature who carried it about parading his own shame and hers—and *mine*!"

"I think I can understand that, Randall."

"You can't, I say. No woman could. You can't begin to know the humiliation, how it tore me, knowing this fellow walked the earth at all, a nameless spawn, holding my shame over me—over *me*! threatening every instant to cover me again with it. As if I'd not survived enough! Good God! was I to go through it again, and know that this puling whelp was the instrument—a thing to torture me, hold me up to ridicule, to make men smile and titter and mock me in club corners? Wasn't *her* insult enough? Must she breed obscene things to echo it?" He groaned and turned away with a gesture of warding off. In the mist of her besetment the woman found herself thinking that the fine little hands in this gesture should have been lace-beruffled at the wrist. He was the figure of stabbed vanity, the bleeding coxcomb. He flung an arm toward the picture with bitter vehemence.

"Ah, my lady! my fine, loose lady, with your high talk and your low way! I hope you've watched me with those painted eyes of yours. Did you think I'd never strike back?"

"But now, Randall—*how*?" He replenished his glass and turned slowly away from the picture.

"How, indeed? That's where you meet me at last. Not every one could have carried it through, but it was simple for me. Difficult in a way, yes. It's been hard to stomach the fool, with his conceit and his whining. Oh, he fancies himself tremendously, for all his ways of a holy innocent,

his damned airs of a sugar-candy Galahad. But I've won him, I tell you, by that very innocence of his. I'm the one soul in the world he truly reveres. His sun rises and sets in me. And now he's where I want him. I've worn out his hope, kept him from doing the thing he wanted to do, kept him on the edge of despair out of respect and fear and love of me. The beggar *has* a certain devilish sort of genius, but he doesn't know where it lies, and I've taken precious good care he shouldn't find out. Oh, but I've had a rich time of it—disgusting and rich. Nearly a year it is now that he's led me this dance, but I've hooked him beautifully, and to-night I'll pull him in." She had been watching the play of spite on his face, and it was with difficulty that she moistened her lips to say: [239]

"But what will you do to-night—what can you say?"

"Everything I've laid a train for saying, this year past. Tell him how I despise him for his empty pretensions, his constant, wretched failures. Show him to himself as a conceited dawdler and a cheat who has lived on my bounty—oh, I saw to that—a cheat who has defrauded me of time and money and faith in man. Never fear but I'll know the things to say. I've told them to *her* often enough." He thrust viciously at the portrait. "And you'll hear it all, my Lady Disdain, with your face to the wall to hide its belated blushes."

Again she tried to speak but her lips were dry. At last she achieved a few rather husky words.

"Randall, if you please, might I have a glass of something—water, I'd like."

"To be sure, my child. You're certain you won't join me in a brandy and soda? No? I'll get you something below."

She clutched at the moment to quiet, if she could, that tumult of heart and brain. Her mind dwelt chiefly on Ewing's dejection as she had left him the day before. Teevan came back, bearing a carafe and a bottle of soda water. She drank a glass of the water greedily, and murmured her thanks as he gave her more. It refreshed her and she seemed to feel a renewal of strength. Her fever was heating her brain to wild activity. She felt a crazy desire to cool her head, to lean it against snow or cold metal. She thought fleetingly of cold things she had touched, of marble, icicles, a brass rail with frost on it. She was goading her mind for a way to reach Teevan. She drank the second glass of water, and again he refilled it, protesting against so poor a tipple as he took more brandy for himself. [240]

She watched him narrowly as he prepared his drink. The decanter was so low that she thought he must be feeling what he had taken, and she wondered if it might not have softened him, released some generosity in his poor soul.

"You must have suffered, Randall, in all this. But won't it hurt you still more, doing what you mean to do—when you make *him* suffer?"

"His suffering!" He waved a deprecating hand. "What can he suffer compared to me? Disgust I've suffered, yes, and mortification. He could feel nothing approaching that if I flayed him here. Why, Nell, I pulled a rose from its bush this morning in Neville's garden, and crushed a worm crawling on its stem. A poor, tiny green thing, yet it had lived, and had its successes and failures after a fashion. But you can't imagine its actual suffering in death to equal my own mere disgust at crushing it."

The brandy had not softened him, she thought. Could it have made him cautious? [241]

"Have you never suspected, Randall, that there may be a sleeping fighter in him?" There was a glitter in her tormented eyes, a sudden fierce wish to behold battle between this puny insulter and Ewing aroused to his might.

"Bah! a fighter!" He snapped contemptuous fingers. "There's the look in his eye sometimes, but I've disarmed him. He *can't* fight me, his benefactor, his best friend. Never fear; he'll wilt, wither, shrivel up. Oh, trust me for that. And suppose the impossible, suppose the worm turns in some fit of wormish desperation. I've the *coup*, have I not? You know what his mother is to him, a damned romantic memory of pure womanhood and all that rot. Suppose him capable of so much as an eye-flash of defiance. Why, then, my child, he'll know who—he'll know *what*—his mother was; and he'll know my right to describe her. He'll know what *he* is. And the words won't puzzle him: he'll need no lexicon—crisp, Anglo-Saxon words. Do you think that will leave any fight in him—her shame and his? By Gad! Nell, it's too good to keep from him. He shall have it anyway, though I'd meant to keep it back for my own sake. But that shall be the clincher. Before her face there I'll tell him what she was."

"Not that, Randall, surely not that!" Her veil of calmness had flown on the wind of his hate. She knew she must reveal herself. Her words had been so near a cry that he turned on her in amazement.

"Listen, Randall, don't—don't do that. Let him off. I promise to take him away. It's all true; you've handled him well, and you can break him now—but don't. Please, please let him go. I'll take him away, I tell you. I promise he shall never bother you again." [242]

He looked at her, incredulous.

"You're asking me to consider *him*—really?"

"No, no—to consider me. Please, please listen—please consider me."

"But you—I thought you——"

"Randall"—she had regained a little of her first coolness—"I'm done for. I found that out to-day. I've a year to live, at most. A scant year, if it's to be like this. Try to grasp it. I've wanted so much, had so little of life. But, I must go, they tell me. Can you understand what that means, as well as I understood what this meant to you—a sentence of death, a few little months to snatch at happiness?"

He stared at her uncertainly, but half comprehending. She saw that the drink was affecting him at last. His eyes were dulled, his face had lost its centered look.

"Going to die, Eleanor? Die in a year? What rot! Don't talk rot. Nobody dies in a year." He spoke carefully, with a deliberate attack on each word, as if he mistrusted his tongue.

"But it's true, Randall, I swear it's true. Can you understand?"

"Understand?" he repeated, and through her tense absorption she was astonished to see on his face an incredible look of pity. "Understand? Why, of course! And it's too bad, my girl. Poor Eleanor! Die in a year—why wouldn't I understand? But never mind"—he seemed to search clumsily for words of cheer. "Death isn't anything but an incident in the scheme of life—a precious contemptible one, I've no doubt. We live, and that's a little thing—but death's littler. I [243] dare say we live as long as we need to. Who was the old chap—Plotinus, wasn't it?—conceived the body to be a penitential mechanism for the soul? All the better if we expiate early. Gad! I must have had a quantity of things to atone for—though I'm really younger than you may think, Nell. Poor girl—poor girl!" He brightened as he drained his glass to her. "Here's to you, wherever you are. Come, be cheerful anyway. What was it struck in my mind yesterday?—a sentence from one of Arbuthnot's letters to Swift—just the meat for you—'A reasonable hope of going—a reasonable hope of going to a good place and an absolute certainty of leaving a bad one.' That's the sentiment—keep it in mind, my dear."

She was nerving herself to new appeals, half fearing she could not hold his attention. She seized on that unprecedented look of compassion.

"But, Randall, you'll let him off—let him off for me—for my sake." In her eagerness she rose and fluttered to the desk, standing before him. He whirled his chair about, and the look of commiseration had gone.

"No, no, no! You can't understand, Nell. I couldn't let him off if I wanted to. It's fate, its retribution—the sins of the father—it's scriptural, I tell you—" His eyes were gleaming again with steely implacability.

"But for me, Randall, for my sake, for me alone—not thinking of him?"

"Ah, lady, set me a harder task, but one of dignity—as difficult, as dangerous as you like, so it has some dignity. But not that. Here"—he gracefully extended the handle of the dagger to her—"slay me an' you will—the blade is keen—a toy, but deadly—I'll die smiling if you wish. But don't ask for that cub's happiness. Don't rob me of my pay, Nell, my pay for all I've endured from him, [244] his boastings and snivelings, and his detestable handshakes. Don't talk rot, I say, even if you must die."

Again she set herself to plead, desperation feeding the fire in her head until she knew not her words. She was conscious only of a torrent of speech, coaxing, imploring, wheedling, even threatening. But all she evoked was the steady, smiling negative, his head shaken unwittingly to the rhythm of her phrases.

She stopped at last, panting, striving to keep back the passionate words of entreaty that still formed, crushing them down in a maddened consciousness of their impotence. She stared wildly, feeling only a still stubborn determination. Ewing would soon come—yet it seemed that she had no resource save appeal. She felt this and raged against it, striding away from Teevan across the room. For the first time in her gentle life she was feeling the sensation she thought a man must feel in fighting. She had an impulse to strike blindly, to wound, to beat down with her hands. Without volition she measured her antagonist and wondered deliriously if she could throw him to the floor. He seemed so small to her, and hateful—hateful and small enough to kill. She closed her eyes to shut him out, but opened them again quickly, for everything rocked in the darkness. She incessantly pictured this creature, naked in his poverty of manhood, smiling up at Ewing, the friendly one, who stood bowed down, blighted and broken of heart. Sometimes Ewing had his arm over his face, and she felt that he would never take it away—move on thus forever, like a figure in an anguished dream.

Constantly beside her thoughts, like a little refrain, went the remembrance that she had [245] brought him there, torn him from his youth and splendid dreams to give him to this—she the betrayer! The fever waxed, the tortured blood trampled in her head like hurrying hoofs.

But she could not strike Teevan, extinguish him with blows, and she set herself again to play the beggar. And she could not beg across the room. Bit by bit she crept to the entreated one, her great eyes full of flame and fear, and laid pitiful hands on his shoulder. Still the shaken head met her, the icy smile, the dulled eyes.

"No good talking, Nell! No good! You mortify me, my word you do. Demand something great, something to task a man; ask me——"

Again he picked up the dagger with a return to that extravagant air of the sighing gallant.

"—here, I point it to my heart, see! A mere thrust—your beautiful hand is still equal to it. I'd be proud of the blow. I'd give you my life gladly—but not my self-respect. You're too stunning a woman, Nell, to waste yourself on that cub—a woman to die for indeed. You were never finer than at this moment." In the excess of his emotion he threw an arm about her waist. She started back but he held her.

"Never finer, Nell, on my soul—too fine for that damned——"

She put out her hands in an instinctive, shuddering movement of repulsion. Still he clung to her, muttering his insupportable phrases. He clung and she could not release herself without doing what she had thought was impossible—exert her unused hands in striking, thrusting, beating off. She hesitated: she did not like to touch him. He looked very small and low in his [246] chair. How low he seemed from her dizzy height! And yet he held so well. His voice came faintly, too, as if from afar, floating up faint and hateful. So he would hold Ewing and slay him with his voice. He was playing with the dagger again and proffering his heart with maudlin eyes. Prisoning her still with his right arm, he took her hand in his left and clumsily set it on the dagger's hilt.

"It would be a sweet death, Nell. Press home!" He drew her closer, so that she staggered on his shoulder. "Gad! your eyes are fine. What a woman you are! Too great, Nell, for that beaten whelp, even before he took to your sister——"

She gave a desperate little cry and struck out to free herself. It was hardly more than a gesture to have him away, but she was conscious, with a lightning shock, that the blade moved under her hand. She heard Teevan's shrill scream of fright and pain——

"You're killing me—you're killing me!"

But she saw only Ewing with covered face, and pushed the harder, lost to all but her blind sense of opposition. Then she heard a new note in Teevan's cry.

"Ewing! Ewing!"

She turned quickly, while Teevan retreated round a corner of the desk, snarling his rage—turned to see Ewing.

CHAPTER XXV [247]

MRS. LAITHE IS ENLIGHTENED

HE stood just inside the door, hat in hand, regarding the scene with a look that was troubled yet cool. She felt her way cautiously back to a chair, afraid of fainting, and grasped it for support. Finding that her hand still clutched the dagger, she dropped it with a shudder of disgust.

Ewing shrewdly noted where the dagger fell, then his eyes flashed to Teevan. There was a stain of blood on the silken shirt, and the little man was staring down at this, incredulous.

"By God! she meant it!" he muttered. Then his eyes rose to meet Ewing's, and a look of sudden malignance blazed into them.

"So you've come!" The cry, like the look, was full of hate. "You've come in time, you whelp! Now you'll hear something you might have heard that first night when I had to fuddle you with tales of a seizure. Now you'll know——"

But the woman started toward him with a suddenness that broke his speech.

"If you tell him he'll kill you—" The words came with a quick, whispering intensity, and there was a rapt, almost rejoicing look on her face, as of one eager for the deed.

Teevan looked scornfully to Ewing again, but was chilled by a certain sharp, cold light in his [248] eyes, the look of one alert and ready. His words gave meaning to this look.

"If you tell me, I'll kill you," said Ewing. The sentence was evenly uttered, and the tone was low, almost deferential, but the intention was not to be mistaken.

Teevan laughed, flourishing a gesture of scorn for the threat.

"I'm no coward"—but he broke off, waiting, watching, with fear in his eyes.

"I'll take this," said Ewing. He lifted the portrait tenderly from the chair and thrust it under his arm with a protecting movement. Teevan stared at this with an air of fine disdain, but did not

speak.

The woman had been waiting for his words with parted lips. Now she breathed a long, trembling sigh of relief and turned to Ewing.

"You see, he has nothing to say. Let us go."

He opened the door for her and closed it after them without looking again at Teevan.

"There's a reason why I can't do it for you now," he said, as they went down the stairs. She wondered what he could mean, but was too little alive to ask. When they reached the street she became at once interested in a belated laborer going home with a loosely tied bundle over his shoulder, odds and ends of small boards, refuse from some building. He whistled in a tired way as he trudged on, not looking at them. She felt pleased at the thought that his wife was going to have wood with which to cook the poor fellow's supper. The dark was fast gathering, but children still romped in the street. An elderly stout man passed, his hat off, wielding a palm-leaf fan. She [249] was surprised at this, for the outer air had fallen on her with icy clutch, making her draw the scarf more closely about her.

Ewing would have left her at her door, but she urged him to go in. She took him to sit in the unlighted library, and there, when he could no longer see her face, he was astounded to hear her talk of her girlhood, her schooldays, of the few people they knew in common, of Piersoll's new book, of her brother's ranch life; of a score of little gossipy matters that would occur to the untroubled mind in a twilight chat. But when he rose to go after a little time, she was in an instant wild panic of protest, seizing one of his hands with a convulsive grip. He covered her poor hand with his own and regarded her with pity. She lifted her face to him with a sudden wild entreaty for shelter. "Oh, stay with me—stay—stay—and comfort me. I am so ill, and I—I would comfort you." He soothed her as best he could, protesting that he would stay, and in a few moments she was talking cheerfully of Kensington and of Virginia. She tried to amuse him with tales of Virginia's childhood—how she had been such a droll and merry little creature. She still retained his hand, gripping it with an intensity through which he could feel the quivering of her whole body.

Only once did she refer to Teevan. "Please don't see him again," she urged. "Promise me, promise never to let him tell you—anything. Please, please promise that!"

Believing she pleaded for herself, he felt that old longing to lift her in his arms and show her there without words how little she had to fear. But he controlled himself to answer simply, "I promise; I'll never let him speak to me again. Don't be afraid; he shall never say anything to me." [250]

Her father came in presently, grumbling about the lack of light as he stumbled against a chair. He let it be known that he had returned to the city in some alarm about her, inspired by a letter from her aunt. She hastily assured him that she was well—never better. But he demurred at her remaining longer in town.

"You'll have to get out, daughter. It's beastly unpleasant doing those slum things in summer. You need life and gayety. You come with me and dance, play bridge, swim, sail—enjoy yourself with your own kind for a while. You're going on Tom Neville's yacht to-morrow. He's to pick us up about noon with Randy Teevan."

"Will he be there?" she asked.

"He will, and he'll be one of a jolly crowd that will 'liven you up. Here's Clarence—he must come, too."

Her brother had felt his way through the darkness, and before she guessed his intention he had found one of the electric lights and turned it on. She shrank back with a strange, smothered cry, under the sudden light, her hand before her face as if to ward off invisible horrors, her eyes staring at them under it, wild with appeal. They were speechless for the moment, alarmed by her manifest illness, her frightened, haggard face, in which the fever raged. Her brother was the first to speak, going to her and taking the blind, defending hand she had put out. She clung to him when she felt his touch, but turned her face away.

"See here, Nell," he began, in tones of savage decision, "no yachting trip for you, my girl. 'Twon't do, governor, you can see that for yourself. But I'll tell you what she's going to do—she's [251] going to pack up and go back to the mountains with me and stay there till she's well."

She still clung to him, drawing his arms around her with an effect of hiding.

"Yes, yes, that's it—let's go there—out where there's room. It's stifling here. Have you noticed how curiously stifling it is? Too many people, dead people and live people, and all hobnobbing. We must get away, brother."

"You hear that, dad? She'll go back with me. How soon, Nell?—I say, how soon?" he repeated, for she had not seemed to hear him.

"How soon?" She raised her eyes to them with sudden intelligence, then sprang wildly to her feet.

"Oh, soon, at once!—Well, not to-night, perhaps,"—she sank back again—"but to-morrow, next day. We'll all go. Mr. Ewing is going." Her eyes rested on Ewing a moment, then, with a difficult

smile, she turned to her brother. "And Virgie must go, too. Telegraph her to-night. She'll make us gay, she'll make us—as we used to be. We couldn't go without Virgie. She will—comfort us."

"She'll go, too, Sis. It's all right. I'll telegraph. But what are you afraid of? You'll be a well woman there in a month."

"Afraid—I afraid?" She looked up at him in wonder. "I don't know. Oh, yes I do. Why, I just tried to kill—I've just killed—killed a hundred people—killed——"

"Good Lord—there—she's fainted! Get some water and a drop of brandy, dad!"

"Poor child—it's so fearfully unpleasant," murmured Bartell as he came back with a glass and [252] decanter. "It's that tenement house thing that's got on her nerves."

"An unpleasant business," returned his father, "all that rot—mighty unpleasant!"

Ewing waited in the outer room until he heard the broken murmur of her voice and knew that she had recovered. Then he went quickly out, the portrait under his arm. He had the feeling that it had been contaminated by Teevan's touch.

He began dismantling his studio that night. He stopped in the work once to look out over the roofs, glowing luridly under a half moon. This was because the pleading of the woman still rang in his ears—"Don't let him tell you anything"—and the whole entreating look of her flashed back to him. Then the big, slow tears of pity gathered in his eyes to set the chimney pots dancing before him.

"If only I hadn't owed him money!" he muttered, beside himself with pity and hatred.

It was not until the day before they started West that Mrs. Laithe learned the secret of this pity of Ewing's that had so puzzled her. Alden Teevan begged a moment with her in the afternoon of that day, and she, sunk in the languor of her sickness, received him where she lay, in her own sitting-room.

He swept her with a long, knowing look as he entered, reading, she saw, the truth about her condition.

"I'd gladly go with you, Nell," he began—"let my own walls close at the same time." But she would have no bald admissions.

"I'm not going, Alden—I'm only a bit run down. I shall pick up in a month out there." He [253] detected her insincerity but only smiled in a hurt way.

"That's one of your rules of the game, isn't it, to keep up the pretense? Of course I can't expect you to break rules for me." She faced him stanchly, looking denial.

"But I must tell you something," he went on quickly, "something horrible and absurd and unbelievable." She listened, and grew faint in an agony of unbelief, while he told her what had inspired Ewing's behavior the night before. She made him repeat it, testing each detail, weighing its credibility against Ewing's inexperience; dazedly trying to see herself as he must see her now. Alden Teevan regarded her with quickening sympathy.

"It wasn't a pretty thing to do, Nell, but I saw he had some deviltry afoot, and I got it from him —I half choked and half wheedled it from him. Fortunately he was drunk or I couldn't have got it either way. But now you know. It began, as nearly as I could gather, one night last spring when Ewing saw you leaving the house. The vain little fool guessed he'd seen you, and told him the tale about a woman who'd been harassing him because he was trying to break off an affair with her."

"I remember——"

"And then last night——"

"Last night—ah, last night!" She laughed weakly, recalling the scene that had met Ewing's eyes, perceiving what he must have thought. "I'd have done it for you," she heard him say again, and shuddered. She recalled, too, her own later urging, "Never let him tell you anything." How pitiful she must have seemed to him, and how monstrous! She laughed again wildly, suddenly [254] struck by the cunning of this satire on truth. Alden Teevan recalled her from the picture.

"It was like him, wasn't it, Nell?—like both of them—like him to say it, and like the other to believe. But the harm can be undone. You can explain—a word or two."

She stared at him in sudden consternation. It had flashed upon her that no half truth would satisfy Ewing. She knew she would be unequal to any adequate fiction; she would falter and he would see to the heart of her lie. She must let him think as he did—or blacken his dearest memory. But to Alden Teevan she only said:

"Ah, yes—a word will explain—and I'm so grateful to you." She was wondering then if she were glad or sorry that he had told her. She might have lived out her time without knowing, she thought.

"Of course, if you'd like me to tell him, Nell——"

"No, no, Alden, thank you; but that's for me."

They had not spoken Ewing's name, but his concern in the matter, the meaning of his faith in the woman, was a matter that seemed to lie open to them both. Alden Teevan had assumed it and she had made no denial. His recognition of it colored his leave-taking.

"All happiness for you, Nell. The game ought to be worth playing with you—and with him. You both live so hard." He found it difficult to say as little, there was such gratitude and such misery in her eyes as they fell before his, trying to veil at least a part of what she felt. But he left her so.

She lay a long time trying to realize Ewing in this new light. She had never read anything in his eyes but the fullest devotion, and yet for months he had believed this sinister thing. She caught again his young, sorry, protesting look, and the poignancy of it brought her tears. There came [255] into the tenderness she had felt for him something of awe for his unquestioning allegiance, a thing that had not wavered under the worst he could believe. Then the monstrous absurdity of what he did believe came upon her once more and she laughed; but her tears still fell. And so, with laughter and tears, she set him up anew in her heart, her beloved child and her terrible master. She was glad now that she knew. It made him more to her. And the time would be so short.

CHAPTER XXVI [256]

THE SUNSET TRAIL

EWING had looked forward pleasantly to meeting Virginia Bartell again, but it was a new Virginia who met him with a nod when he joined the party on the evening of the start. She had eyes only for her sister, the white, weak, phantom thing who smiled terribly as her brother half carried her into the stateroom of their car. Through the days of the journey he sought to cheer her, wistfully making jests about the flat land and its people as they sped through the little wooden towns, promising her a land that would be "busy every minute." But she would only say, "I'll like your land when it makes sister well."

"It's bound to," he assured her. "Nobody dies there unless he gets careless. Here, this is the way it happens. Here's Ben Crider's last letter. You'll like Ben. Listen to this and see if it doesn't make you hopeful." He opened the scrawled sheet and read:

"'Dear Kid, I thought it about time to write you a few lines. If you seen the lake now you would want to of been here. Life and nature seems very complete here. I heard Chet Lynch shot Elmer Watts. I been building a haystacker for Pierce. Plenty deer sign around the lick. Lee Jennings was killed by a bucker falling back on him. I can sell your saddle for twenty-two dollars to Ben Lefferts. I put a new latigo on it. Let me know. Say, Kid, I sent two dollars to the Mystic Novelty [257] Company. The address is Lock Box 1347. The ad. said they would send you a book how to read past, present and future from the hand and a genuine ten-karat Persian diamond pin set in solid gold, if you sent on one dollar in stamps or P. O. order. Well, the diamond may be all right enough Persian, but the solid gold setting has turned black. You go there and ask for the head man and raise particular—'" He broke off the reading.

"You see, they only die by getting shot, or falling off a horse."

The girl shuddered and turned to him with a sudden helpless yielding.

"I can hardly bear it," she said, almost in a whisper. "You don't know what she is to me, how I've loved her and loved her and loved her. And yet I've accepted her as a matter of course, a thing that couldn't be taken from me, like the world itself. How could I think she might be like—like those others? Oh, I never dreamed I could lose my dearest—my dearest!"

He waited a moment, and at last said gently, "You won't lose your dearest—we won't lose her."

"Oh, but she's going, before our eyes."

"Listen to me, listen now! She's going to get well. She'll be strong again—I know it. I say she can't die; but you must be sure of it—as sure as I am—do you hear?—as sure as I am."

"Yes, yes—I will be sure." She tried to look at him through her tear-wet lashes. He smiled at her confidently.

"If we're both sure, we can have your sister crying in a month because Ben won't let her work in the garden."

"Oh, if you only—" She broke off to look at him in wondering gratitude. [258]

"And I'll go in and tell her so now," he added, rising.

"Yes, yes, make her feel sure, too," she implored. She turned quickly to the car window, where twilight was blurring the fields to a far, dreamy horizon, level and vast. He stood a moment,

tracing with mental point the line of her profile under the boyish cap pinned to her yellow hair.

Mrs. Laithe lay on a narrow sofa in the stateroom. She had moved from that only to the berth at night since their start, and had betrayed a preference for being alone in the little compartment. Ewing had felt, however, that she liked to talk with him as evening drew on. She had sent for him at this hour the day before and they had sat together in the dusk. He was reassured by the cheerfulness of her tone as she greeted him now.

"We're flying so fast," she said joyously.

"To make you well the sooner. I've just been telling Virginia what we'll do for you even in a month. You'll be riding and climbing, and you'll cry because you can't fell trees or rive out shakes, or something."

"I'm not worrying about that. It will come right very soon."

"We'll make it come right. No one ever dies a natural death there, you know. I was just reading your sister a letter from Ben. Lee Jennings killed breaking a horse, Elmer Watts shot by Chester Lynch. Of course, in a way, that was a natural death for Elmer. He was bound to go that way sooner or later, but you're not going to ride a bucker, and you're not a gunfighter. Oh, you'll thrive, with a little stall feeding."

"And there's so much room out there." She smiled. "So much room to—to live. And life is so full. [259]
I like to hear it, through Virgie and through you. You are shells that give me the roar of it."

He was sensitive to some pathos of aloofness which her whole being expressed for him, and he strove to meet this with pictures of herself returning, a well woman; but she turned her face from him at length, and did not speak for so long that he thought she might be sleeping. He went carefully out, with a last enveloping look.

When he had gone the woman laughed in a helpless, shuddering way, then raised herself far enough toward the window to see the fields rushing by outside. There was timidity in her look until she had seen a mile of that relentless earth rush back and away from her. She seemed to need this assurance that she was going away from the trouble in the crude, literal sense of earthly distance—going off where there was room "to live," she had told Ewing; "to die," she had amended the phrase to herself. For death was now a solace she faced. She who had been so hot for the fight, so avid of life, had been cheated of a combatant's privileges. She could not tell Ewing the truth, and she could not live while he believed the lie. It was well, she thought, to know that she had only to let herself float down that placid current of the white death. She was amazed at her own calmness and tested it in all subtle ways, making sure of its foundations. She could find no weak spot. She craved only a moderate speed in the descent. Too long a wait would be wearisome, and the wise man had assured her against that. Yet she felt that she had the right to be a little glad when her brother told her the next day of a change in the plan.

"It will be better for you and Virgie to go to Ewing's place, Nell. It's always quiet there, and my [260]
place is pretty busy and noisy. I'll manage to stay over there with you a good deal, and we'll get a woman to come and do for you—I know one that will be glad to come. It will only be for a little while, you know."

She smiled at that well-worn fiction, but applauded the plan.

"I shall like it, dear, and Virgie will, too, I'm sure, if you think it best, and if Mr. Ewing——"

"Ewing suggested it, and he didn't waste any words telling what a good plan he thought it was. We'll have some extra things brought up from Pagosa to make you comfortable, and you can have a bully long rest there."

"A long rest, yes—and let us have a piano. I'd like to hear some music while I'm resting."

"Sure! we'll have one up from Durango. You might need to stay there until—well—into the winter, you know."

"I think so, Clarence." She was tempted sometimes to confide to him the truth about her sickness, but refrained.

"Well, it won't be very long. All you want is a rest."

Her mind echoed it when he had gone. Yes, a rest. She looked up at Virginia, who had entered softly. Her face still shone with the thought of rest and release, and she smiled up at the girl, who had laid a cool hand on her flushing cheek, and now regarded her with devouring eyes. She stood so a moment, then knelt to peer at the wasted face. She looked a long time without speaking, looked shrewdly and, at last, accusingly.

"What is it, dearest? I saw it in your face yesterday. What is it I see? Something has frightened you—beaten you."

The other smiled protestingly, chidingly, with a raised finger; but the girl was not to be [261]
appeased.

"You won't tell me, Nell; I know you; you'll keep it in. But, oh, dearest!" She suddenly gathered the sick woman into her strong young arms, raising her head from the pillow, holding the fevered face to her breast, pressing her own cool cheek to the hot brow.

"Dearest dear, let me in. Trust me. Tell me where it hurts. Let me mother you."

"There, there, dear! Everything is all right. Lay me down again and be easy in that mind of yours."

But once more on the pillow she had to endure again the girl's accusing eyes.

"Nell, someone hasn't loved you enough. That's what I feel. Who is it?"

"Nonsense! You're only worried because I'm a little run down. Everyone loves me enough—all I deserve. There, dear, I think I can rest." The girl kissed her shut eyes, and went out, after a long, doubting look. The sick woman raised her arms once, like a child who would be taken, but they fell back, and she painfully laughed the old low laugh of secrecy.

She mused on her brother's words. "A little rest." Yes, a rest. "Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep." She remembered now that it would come to her in the shelter of those hills, perhaps in that room to which her thoughts had flown so many times, where she had seen the awakening man in the sleeping boy, and caught misty shadowings of the portent he bore for her. Her eyes might fall before his now, but they need not fall before the eyes of his mother.

CHAPTER XXVII

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THE HILLS OF REST

BEN Crider waited for them on the station platform at Pagosa. He was excited to a point of feverish unrest until the train warned its way out of the last cañon. Then, by a masterful effort, he became elaborately nonchalant. That train had brought Ewing back to him, but he constrained himself to handle the occasion as one rising hardly to common levels. He would have considered any other demeanor "shameless."

He nodded to Bartell, who supported his sister from the car, and stared politely at the pretty but anxious-looking girl who followed them. But when Ewing appeared, burdened with handbags, Ben ignored him, and rushed to shake the hand of Beulah Pierce, returning from a three-days' trip to Durango. So effusive was his greeting that Pierce mentally convicted him of having lingered at the "Happy Days" bar for one too many drinks, and broke from his affectionate grasp with some embarrassment.

Ben strolled forward to the baggage car, humming lightly, and, with the bored air of a man creating diversion for himself, laid listless hands on the trunks as they were unloaded. He was whirling one of the heaviest of these to the waiting wagon when Ewing fell on him with a glad shout. Ben paused briefly, balancing the trunk on a corner, glanced up with moderate surprise, and spoke his welcome.

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"Oh, that you, Kid? Howdy!" He resumed his struggle with the trunk, blind to the other's outstretched hand, and when Ewing thereupon hissed at him, "You damned Mexican sheep herder!" he allowed pleasure to show but faintly in his face. But when he was seized by the collar, hurled half across the platform, and slammed brutally against the wall of the station, he protested with pleased annoyance as he picked up his hat, "Aw, quit yer foolin', now, Kid! I got to hustle them trunks." He was sufficiently refreshed by the attack, however, to sing to himself as he labored. And when the start was made he insisted that Ewing should drive. Ben sat in the rear seat. He wanted to look at Ewing's back for five hours.

The sick woman, in another and easier conveyance, rejoiced that she was going still farther into the peace of her last refuge. As they left the brown-floored valley and began to climb the mountain road, she was glad that the green walls closed in behind them; glad of every difficult ascent; every stream forded; every confusing turn of the way. She was hiding herself, cunningly insuring the peace of her last hours.

She was troubled now only by Virginia, who hung upon her with an agonized solicitude. But she promised herself to wear this down by her own cheerfulness and expressed certainty. Virginia would see her peaceful, hopeful, happy; she would become used to the idea of her wasting; and the actual going out would come gently to her as something fit and benign. Life so abounding as Virginia's could not long droop under the shadow of death.

Made at home in the lake cabin, she still felt the world rushing back from her as had the fields rushed by when she looked from the car window. And she rested in this. Affairs went on about her, plans were made, talk of the future or of the day; all went by her unheeded, save for a blurred and pleasant effect of swiftness. Outwardly she was serene, languorous, incuriously placid. Inwardly she thrilled with a luxury of inertness. She had loosed herself in the ebbing tide, and she folded her hands and smiled from this with the assured indolence of one who knows that

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some earned reward will not long be delayed. The slow-paced even life was a balm to her, the gathering about the table at mealtimes, the evenings in the studio, when her sister played or talked with Ewing; when she could lie still on the couch and try to make herself forgotten, regretting only the short dry cough that racked her night and morning and brought her to the minds of the others.

She had thought that she could adjust herself, after a little, to the new look in Ewing's eyes, knowing as she did its secret spring. It was a look of blind acceptance, of unquestioning adoration—and mingled with it was a maddening pity. But there flashed from him, too, at times, a look of purpose and assurance, steady, secret, determined. She detected this chiefly when he glanced up to her from his drawing. He had brought with him a story to illustrate for the *Knickerbocker*, and he was, at last, to finish that series of Western scenes for the same periodical. And he had flown to this work with a frantic haste, with the look, as he bent over the board, that seemed to say: "This is for you. Be patient with me, it will soon be done."

When the work did not claim him he stayed by her side, watchful for service, jealous of Virginia [265] for little acts he might not himself perform. His eyes seldom left her, she thought, though she could not long endure their look, and she knew that he read this evasion of hers in the light of what Teevan had told him. Through all his devotion there was a gentle aloofness, a constant withdrawing, as if he knew that he must never come close.

She had laughter and tears again for this when she was alone, though there were times when, in her weakness, her wild craving for the fullness of what she might not have, she would have told it all in one surrendering cry to him but for the eyes of Kitty Teevan. They were always upon her now—Ewing had hung the portrait in the studio—holding her with passionate entreaty, the mother pleading for herself in the son's memory. She could never tell him, she knew, under those eyes. She must live out her few days in content with that wondrous thing his own eyes revealed for her. She thought it comic and tragic and beautiful. One night she dreamed that she was not to die, and woke in horror of what his belief would then mean. But morning restored her serenity, and she reposed placidly again on the unquestioned sureness of her going.

Best of all times she liked the late morning and midday, when she could be alone in the sun-heated nook out of doors and give her body to the warmth. She knew it was a primal, sensuous pleasure, but she surrendered to it; turned and bathed writhingly in the sun flood, feeling herself transparent to it. And the pleasure had its reverse side. Autumn came presently in these upper reaches; a less splendid autumn than would set the Eastern woods ablaze with flaunts of gold and [266] scarlet, but an autumn more eloquent of death, the faded yellow of the aspen groves, broken but rarely by some flaming shrub that only emphasized the monotone. This, the unending, lifeless yellow, and the dead green of spruce and hemlock—a false green, she felt, with its tale of ever-living—made a coloring of nice symbolism for her state.

Had she felt the need of a death's head at her sun feast, this neutral, denying flatness would have sufficed. The end had come home to her. It was her unseen familiar, voiceless, but ever present, with a look unhurrying but constant.

And there were the mountains themselves, things that had once leaped alive and tortured themselves into frenzied furies of striving only to be stricken and left at last in all the broken tossing of their folly. They had tried the fighting death, and it had availed only to fix their last agonies. Their scarred hulks testified to the wisdom of submission.

Yet her mind was normal in these sun-warmed hours of musing. She knew that those dead hills with their dying leafage told another tale to the pair of young lives housed with her. To them they were but inspirations to life vital and triumphant; eminences to be scaled in joyous effort, offering to youth's dreaming, half-true clairvoyance, unending reaches to provoke; near enough to seem attainable; far enough to be plausible with promise of delights.

Nor did she fail to rejoice in the fervor of this fresh view so unlike her own. She was conscious of its truth to untouched souls like theirs, and she sought to throw them together, urging them to excursions through the hills. She thought of them at first as her pair whom she had set in a [267] garden where the fruit of no tree was forbidden.

She coolly studied Ewing on the days when he worked indoors, detaching herself from his life as one about to go on a long journey. From her shadowed couch she scanned his face as he bent over the drawing board. It had filled in the year since she first saw it, and was an older face, the strength of it more conscious, the promise of it almost kept in its well-controlled, level-eyed maturity. Much of the boy remained to flash out, but she saw that this would never go; that it would kindle his eyes when the brown hair had gone white. It was this eternal boyishness, she saw, that made him quick of response to another's interest; this that had made him seem too ductile under Teevan's manipulation, when in truth he had merely been loath to hurt, fearing nothing so much as another's pain. The forward line of the nose and the smoldering fierceness of eye should have been more informing. That was the face, vital, fearless, patently self-willed for all its kindly immaturities of concession, that Teevan had thought to prevail over by his stings of waspish contempt. She smiled pityingly for Teevan, until she recalled that she also had misread its lines. There were moments when her beaten spirit fluttered up at thought of Teevan's being blasted by what he had thought to blast. But a look at the mother's restraining face, or, still more, a look at Ewing as he would glance from his work up to the portrait, stilled this craving for battle. It was well, she thought, as it had fallen.

Ewing had set to work doubtingly at first, but with laughing energy when he found that the lines came again at his call. He felt, indeed, that his facility had been increased, and he confided this to Mrs. Laithe one day as she lay watching him. [268]

"I don't have to 'squeeze' the way I did," he said. "Perhaps I really learned something there in spite of myself, in all that messing with colors. I didn't learn to paint, but I seem to have a new line on bucking bronchos and bucked cowboys." He stopped in sudden thought.

"There, I've forgotten that old painting of mine. I'll treat us both to a look at it."

He went off to Ben's room beyond the kitchen and came back with the dusty canvas. He wiped it with a cloth and placed it on the easel.

She did not look at this. She knew it too well. Her look was for his face as he studied it. She saw surprise there, bewilderment, incredulity, and then, slowly dawning, a consternation of dropped jaw and squinting scowl. Yet this broke at length, and, to her great relief, he laughed, heartily, honestly. She smiled, not at the poor painting, but in sympathy with him. Then he remembered that she had looked at this same canvas once before, and that neither of them had laughed. His face sobered, and he went over to her.

"You had nerve, didn't you—after seeing that thing?"

"You remember I didn't praise it."

"But you saw I didn't know any better, and you never let me see that *you* did. You must have thought highly of me, I can see that." He stooped and laid one of his hands on hers with a friendly, thanking pressure.

"I saw plainly enough what you could do," she protested.

He went to stand again before the despised canvas, playing upon it with humorous disparagement. [269]

"But if you see now," she said, "that it's so—if it seems so——"

"Say the word—do!"

"If it seems bad to you now, that's a good sign. It means that you've learned something about color. Suppose it had still seemed good."

He took the thing off the easel.

"If I've learned as much about color as I think this is bad—well there's only a little left for me to learn."

"Now you will paint others that will seem faultless at the time and bad a year later. That's the penalty of growth, but it's the proof. Make your prayer to the god of painting: 'May everything I do seem bad when it's a year old!'"

"I'll try to," he returned gravely. Then, "Let's put this out of sight quick, before Virginia sees it."

"You didn't burn it," she asked, when he returned.

"I should think not. I'd have to fight Ben if I burned that. Of course I didn't know any better when I gave it to him, any more than I knew about his songs. That's another thing you must have laughed at me for."

He laughed himself as she looked up at him with puzzled inquiry, and went on to confess how he had sung Ben's choicest ballad at the Monastery.

"Of course it's a funny song," he continued, as he returned to the drawing board, "but it isn't so very much funnier than a lot that aren't supposed to be funny at all. Come, now," he rallied her, "don't they all rub in the sadness, even the ones you might think serious? There must be a million songs about 'Dreaming,' 'I Dreamed that You Were with Me, Love!' and 'It was All a Dream!' and 'Could I but Recall that Day!' and 'Alas, It was not so to be!' and 'Must We, then, Part Forever!' Always crying about something! Always moaning 'if only' something or other. They're about as teary a lot as Ben's songs. I told Virginia last night I never wanted to hear another 'Could I but—' song; they're as bad as 'The Fatal Wedding.'" [270]

Though he had rushed at the drawings with a powerful incentive—to make himself free so that he could perform one great service for his lady—he yielded often to the persuasions of Mrs. Laithe and took Virginia out for adventures. They explored box cañons that she believed to be impenetrable until he nonchalantly opened a way to their secret recesses. They whipped trout streams and he complacently caught fish from holes she would angle in without result. He tried to persuade her that certain brown patches he professed to detect off through the forest from time to time were deer; but vainly each time, until there would be a sudden terrific shattering amid the underbrush, and perhaps a fleeting glimpse of the brown patch with its white center, flying in swift rebuke to her unbelief. They climbed hills together, and he irritated her by his continued ease of breath under the strain, while her own "wind" that she had thought so well of in Kensington was exhausted by the first moments of effort. She believed him guilty of a polite fiction when he explained that the altitude made all the difference. She disbelieved his tale of the lake water's coldness—it was annoying to be told that even he wanted no more than a single

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plunge in it—and bathed there one day to her undoing. She refused to believe that he could shoot accurately with a rifle that made so much noise, or with a revolver that wobbled when one tried to hold it still, until he had demonstrated these matters. And she refused to concede that she could not ride a certain half-broken little mare—which Ewing rode without apparent difficulty—until the mare proved it to the satisfaction of all concerned.

These little disbeliefs were not unpleasant to Ewing. He revenged himself for having been proved a "duffer" at her own games.

It was on their return from an afternoon's fishing one day that they found Bartell bestowing Cooney on his sister.

"I bought him for you from Pierce," he was explaining. "Of course Virgie can ride him until you're fit again."

The sick woman greeted her old friend formally in the presence of the others. But when they had gone inside she led the little roan around to the corral, and there, sheltered by its wall, she put an arm tightly over his lowered neck and laid her face to his with fond little words of greeting and remembrance. He had carried her so well on a day when nothing had happened; when she was a girl herself, it almost seemed, more curious of the world than knowing.

That had been an age—a year—ago. The little horse had been bravely doing his work, carrying his inconsequent burdens as they listed, while she had been losing herself in protests. She had begun doing that, it seemed, the first day he brought her there. She wondered if he could remember it. She doubted that; but at least he remembered Ewing and loved him. She clasped the arm more tightly about his neck, and the little horse whinnied, pawing the earth with a small [272] forefoot, and moving his head up and down in a knowing way. To the woman he had the effect of seeking to return her caress, so that in a moment she was sobbing in a sudden weakness of love for him.

CHAPTER XXVIII [273]

THE WHITE TIME

THE days went, shortening. She kept to her couch through all but those hours when the sun was high. Then she lay to be warmed in the open while the year died before her. She could not see another year. She must read all her meanings into this one. September went and October waned. The sky was often overcast. They had ceased to talk of her going back. Her brother reminded her cheerfully that he had half expected a long stay for her. She must be patient. She spoke in his own vein of hopefulness, promising patience, and smiled as ever on her pair, who still wandered in that garden, bantering comrades, tasting the fruit of every tree but one.

And one day she knew that all her imaginings about this pair had been vain, caught it in the deepened look of Ewing as he turned from Virginia to herself. It was a thing to bask in—that look—like the fervid sun itself. But it hurt her, too; made it harder to let go of life. Yet always before her was the face of Kitty Teevan with its beseeching eyes: "You have so little time to live, and I must live in his memory always!" And so she put the thing away, letting him think as he must, wincing under his look of pity, and that devouring thing that lurked always back of his pity, and striving for lightness when she talked with him.

"I understand why our land seemed unreal to you," she said to him while they loitered in the [274] blue dusk of the pine woods near the cabin one day. The peaks beyond were misty behind gray clouds that lay sullenly along the horizon. "I understand why you called our land a stage land, for this is unreal to me, painted, theatrical, impossible. I keep hearing the person who's seen the play telling his neighbor what's to come next."

"It's real enough," he answered, looking away from her. "I have a way of telling when a land is real."

"You have?"

"Any land is real where you are. New England or Colorado or Siberia or——"

"There, there!" she soothed him mockingly—"or India's coral strand. That's quite enough. You have learned your geography lesson. What a busy traveler you must have been!"

"And no land can be real where you are not," he went on gravely. "I go where you go, follow you around the world and out into the stars beyond the moon, up and down and on forever, and it all seems real to me—all except you."

"Oh, I—I'm real, real enough, but this land is a sad, fearful, threatening land, so heartless." She

shivered. "Let us go in!"

"That's only because it's closing up now for the winter; that's why the sky is sorry. The leaves are nearly gone, and the fat old bears are slouching down from the high places to curl up in the holes, and the deer are moving down into the valleys, and pretty soon the hills will crawl under white blankets and go to sleep. And we shall have to do the same. We shall be shut in before you know it, snowed in, frozen in, like the bears. But the winter—it can't take you from me."

"There, there!" But she could not finish. She flashed a helpless smile at him and fled indoors. [275] He went after her, crying that winter was upon them.

And then, all in a day and a night, winter came. The wind fell to an ominous hush one midday, and a leaden quiet lay over the hills. Blurred masses of cloud rose slowly above the peaks, shaping themselves with ponderous sloth. Below these a white mist formed. Then one tiny snow crystal fell. It was followed presently by another, and then by more, floating down with unhurried ease. Meaningless wisps they seemed, fugitive bits of wool, perhaps, from a sheep losing its fleece in some nearby shearing pen. More of them came with the same slow, loitering grace, as if they would lull suspicion of the fury they heralded.

By night the storm had shut off the hills so that the cabin might have been set in a plain, for all the eye could see. The flakes no longer came saunteringly, but swiftly now, in a slant of honest fervor, frankly threatening.

By morning the land was muffled in white. The sun shone pale and cold through the mist, and the wind began a game with its new plaything, still light and dry, and quick to dance to any piping. Spruce and hemlock seemed to have darkened their green, and their arms drooped wearily under the white burdens they bore. The second day's fall buried their lowest branches so that not even the circle of bare earth was left about them.

Inside the cabin they sought the peace of the earth under its cover, the trustful repose of the live things sleeping there. The days sped by almost unmarked. Scarcely ever were they certain of the day of week or month, especially after Ben forgot to mark his calendar on the days he and [276] Ewing devoted to getting deer for their winter's meat. There were but opinions as to the date after that.

Ben, after his work with the stock each morning, hibernated gracefully in a chair by the kitchen stove, sleeping with excited groans, like a dreaming dog. Or, awake, he stared at the wall with dulled eyes. At times he would touch his guitar to life and sing very softly, or hold it affectionately in his lap, a hand muting its strings, while he pondered dreamily of far-off matters, of cities and men, and the folly of expecting ever to receive treasure such as the advertisements promise.

Ewing and Virginia, after the snow packed, went forth on snowshoes far into the white silence; over open spaces so glaring that the eyes closed in defense; through ravines where once-noisy streams were stilled; and under forest arches of green where the snow was darkened to hints of blue—they agreed that Sydenham would paint it blue without condescending to hints—and where the hush was so intense that they instinctively lowered their voices. They passed long times without speech, as they would have done in a church, worshiping the still beauty about them, beauty of buttressed peak, of snow-choked cañon, of green-roofed cathedral, of pink light at sunset on endless snow-quilted slopes.

Mrs. Laithe, too, sought the open when the sun was high, and one day in midwinter she walked as far as the lake in the path beaten by the stock. It did not occur to her then that this was no feat for a dying woman nor even on the succeeding days when this walk became her habit. It was a change for her eyes from the cabin prospect; the sun warmed her genially, despite the intense cold, and she liked the stillness, all the movements of life going on in a strange, muffled silence. [277] This helped her to remember her own plight. Life still abounded with all its warmth and glad clashing, but she must have only eyes for it—no heart of desire. She had been so sure of this from the first that she gave but heedless smiles to the others when they told her she was better. They had always said such things.

She slept the long nights through now, seeking bed like a tired child, and waking in strange refreshment. And milk no longer appeased her hunger as it had wholly done when she arrived. The savor of baked meats was now sweet to her. She was presently walking to the lake both morning and afternoon, breathing deep of the dry air that ran fire in her veins as she absorbed it. And the flush on her face when she returned was not that of fever.

But more eloquent than these physical symptoms was a sullen current of rebellion rising slowly within her, the old fighting instinct, a lust for sheer living, a thing she had believed was long since extinct.

She did not lose her certainty of death all in a day. For weeks she was haunted merely by an unquiet suspicion. The cough still racked her night and morning, and the fever came each evening, but the old potency seemed to have gone from both. She tried to believe at first that this was one of those false rallies so common before the end.

The full, maddening realization came to her on a day when Ewing walked with her to the lake. He turned on her suddenly when they had mounted a slope, seized both her hands, and looked long into her eyes with a certain grave wonder.

"You are made new," he said at last. She trembled in a sudden panic, divining the truth of it, [278]

feeling, as he spoke, a great rush of life overwhelming her.

"You are living again, you are going to live. I knew you would live." He still gripped her hands. It was as if he had drawn her, warm and pulsing, out of all the wintry death about them. She could not face him, but released her hands and turned away. He had seen truly. She had relaxed utterly when she came, to waver unresistingly down into the cool abyss of her despair. But some indomitable brute thing had risen in her while she slept, to fight for life, and to fire her whole being with its triumph. While she had rested and waited in that luxury of self-abandonment she had been cheated of her victory—betrayed back to life.

Trying now to think what life would mean to her, she was overwhelmed with shame and dismay. With death so near things had been simple. But how could she live on and face Ewing, shaming herself and shaming him in the darkness of his belief about her?

They walked back to the cabin in silence. Ewing, too, she felt, saw the future to be less simple now.

"I shall know what to do," he said, as they reached the door; and there was again in his eyes that puzzling look of some fixed purpose. For the first time this vaguely alarmed her now, and she questioned him swiftly with her eyes. But he only pointed to his mother's portrait—they had entered the studio—and said, "Do you think I'd do less for you than I would for her?"

She could endure neither his own look nor the mother's, and fled to her room. There she studied her face in the glass. It was all true. She was going to live, and she sickened at the thought. Again it was a time for tears and laughter.

CHAPTER XXIX

[279]

THE AWAKENING

THE white giant, sun-stricken, drooping languidly, crumbled and dissolved before their eyes. The air softened. The streams rushed full, the southern hillsides showed bare and gaunt.

In the lake cabin they felt aged by their imprisonment. It had been so long, so remote from the world rush. Like prisoners long confined, they were loath to leave a dungeon where life had been well ordered if not exhilarating. Benumbed in the first days of the change, they returned indoors to the soothing evenness of their six months' hibernation. They found those first changes unbelievable. Winter would surely go on forever; too mighty a jailer it was to be vanquished by a mere breath of honey and flowers. They stayed in to warn one another against false appearances.

But there came a day when, in the blaze of noontime, Ben Crider moved his chair out by the door and sang softly to the strains of his guitar. His eyes blinked in the sunlight as he sang, yet they did not fail to detect the signs of spring so plentiful about the clearing in bud and leaf and tiny grass shoot, even though patches of snow still lay in the shaded spots.

The woman who cooked came also to the door as Ben sang. He had spoken of her the winter through as "the woman," dimly perceiving her as a spirit that mumbled endless complainings as she toiled, for she was one who had been disillusioned by much cooking. She cooked acceptably, [280] and Ben had burgeoned in the uncanny luxury of food prepared by another hand than his own, but he had given her little attention beyond discovering her opinion that cooking was a barren performance, since people perversely ate and thereby destroyed, and the thing must be done again endlessly. He had vaguely observed that this woman was not beautiful, and now, as she faced him with a sudden joviality in the spring sunshine, he saw that she could never have been beautiful. She beamed amicably on the balladist, and he, turning casual eyes on her, was stricken to dismayed silence; the tuneful praise of young love fainted on his lips as he stared, aghast, and his startled hand hushed the vibrant strings. A moment he looked, recovering from the shock. Then, in swift recoil, he grasped his chair and went resolutely out under the big hemlock, there to resume his song and his absent contemplation of Nature's awakening—his back to the cabin door. In this sensitive mood he wished not to incur again a vision that blighted song.

It was no longer disputable that spring was real; no baseless tradition, but an unfolding reality. Ben had divined it, and the other prisoners were not long in proving it.

One of them surveyed it in panic wonder, turning in upon herself to face the ordeal of enforced living. They wandered in the open, three of them, now, finding it good to feel the bare, elastic earth under their feet again, and prove the noiseless but sensational life of growing things all about them. They plucked buds to see their secret hearts, and exposed the roots of peeping herbs [281] that had begun their strivings before the snow went.

When the sunny places had been dried and warmed, and were pulsing in their myriad hidden hearts, so that winter began to fade in their minds as some dream of night, they would penetrate

the sunless depths of a narrow cañon where the snow yet lay deep and the stream was a mere choking of ice in a gorge.

It was in the flush of this exultation over winter's downfall that they planned camp life in a vale at the edge of the lake, where the spruces thinned to leave wide-vaulted arches, and spread the floor with yielding brown rugs of the pine needle. They began it as a play, and finished with a permanent camp into which they moved from the cabin. There were tents and beds, a table, a sheet-iron stove, chests for their stores, and hammocks in which to be fanned by the south wind.

Bartell promised his sister vast benefits from this life.

"This will put the finishing touches to you, Sis. A month here and you'll be loping over the range, high, wide, and handsome. It'll take an elk-high fence to hold you after you've slept awhile out here."

She felt the truth of what he said, and was appalled by it. Almost daily she dismayed herself by recalling some unpremeditated feat of strength or endurance. Life had crept back to her like a whipped dog, and bitterly she felt the sting of its satire. She was loath to leave the cabin in which she had so long nursed death. She had impregnated the very walls with an atmosphere of dissolution. But she understood now that that prison house could no longer suffice her. Stubborn life had prevailed over all its powers of suggestion. There she had clung stubbornly to the old [282] solution, cherishing a hope of some sudden relapse, despite the new life that taunted her with its animal buoyance. But once in the open, her brain was washed of that. Her mind was as clear as the fathomless blue above them at noon; and the stars at night were not more coldly luminous than the reasoning she bent upon herself, nor sharper than a certain deduction she made.

Ewing brought his drawing to the camp and spent the mornings in work. He had finished his series for the *Knickerbocker* during the winter, and these drawings, with the illustrations for the story previously made, had brought him enough to discharge the Teevan debt. He had reported this transaction significantly to Mrs. Laithe, and was now busy on pictures for another story for the *Knickerbocker*.

"Only a little longer," he said, with a meaning she could not fathom, and he returned to his work with a singular absorption. Not even Ben could distract him when he sauntered up for his daily criticism. Ben was respectful to the drawings after he saw the checks they brought, but his summing up of the purchaser's acumen never varied.

"Well, well—fools and their money! The idee of payin' out cash for a thing that looks as much like Red Phinney as that there does!"

When work was done for the day Ewing would turn to Mrs. Laithe with a smile of release, and they would stray along some dim trail or off into pathless, shaded silences of the wood, lingering in grassy mountain meadows, or skirting the base of bleak crags where streaks of snow in shadow still clung to the gray walls. She was conscious then of a tumult throbbing wonderfully [283] beneath the surface of their companionship—a tumult of life aching for release. In little chance moments of silence this rumbled ominously, leaving her fearful, but curiously resigned, moved to blind flight, yet chained and submissive as were the hills themselves.

One afternoon they sought their cañon of delayed winter after many days' neglect of it. They wondered if spring might not have reached even that secret recess at last. They left the trail that skirted the edge and descended a rocky way that Ewing found, emerging at last through a fringe of the stunted cedars into the gloom of the depths.

At first glance this last stronghold of winter seemed to have remained impregnable. Snow lay deep along the bottom, enormous stalactites of ice depended from overhanging ledges, and the stream itself appeared to be still only a riven glacier. But, listening intently, they heard a steady liquid murmur, the very music of spring come at last to sing the gorge awake. As they stood, listening, there was a shivering crash; one of the huge icicles had dropped, shattering on a lower ledge and raining its fragments into the soft snowbed below.

"It's the very last of winter," said Ewing mournfully. "That snow is eaten through and through. See how those bits of ice drove into it. And hear that running water. It will be off with a rush now. It's the very last of it—all I shall have to look back to—that winter of ours together." His tone was full of a meaning she dared not question. They climbed in silence to the summer above and traversed, still silently, the stretch of green woods that grew beyond the cañon wall. Only at the first mountain meadow, a dazzle of emerald under the slanting sun, did they halt to gaze at [284] each other. His eyes were wonderfully alight with sadness and rejoicing as she faced him, radiant in a moment of forgetfulness, flagrant in her beauty's renewal.

"You're wonderful again," he said, almost whisperingly, "you're all in flower now!" She quickened under his look, feeling the glow on her cheeks. But that faded at his next words.

"I finished the last of those drawings to-day. Now I must go."

"Ah—go?" It was a little cry, half of question, half of understanding.

"Yes—I can go now. I couldn't go before, but I have the money now."

She sickened as they walked on in silence, fearing to question him, and when they reached the camp she ran to throw herself on the bed in her tent, covering her eyes with her hands, pressing

the lids down, but making no sound.

As they sat about their camp fire that evening Ewing was struck by a certain view he caught of her. She sat in shadow on a stool at the foot of a towering hemlock, and once when he rose to stir the waning fire a flame shot up from a half-burned log, with a volley of sparks that fell back in a golden rain. He glanced over to be sure that she escaped these, and saw her sharply revealed in the sudden light, unconscious of it, unaroused by the crackling explosion. She was staring fixedly into the darkness, her body relaxed, her hands half clasped, her head, the profile toward him, leaning wearily against the tree. Before this background she seemed frail again, her face pallid under the dark of her hair and against the rough, ruddy brown of the tree bole, her whole body [285] contrasting in its fragile lines with the tree's strength—human weakness showing starkly against the vigor of the woods.

To dull the sudden wanting of his heart for her he walked off alone over the path that bordered the lake, to reduce the amazing actuality of things, if he could, to proportions seemly with normal life. But the lake was a mirror of enchantment, the booming of an owl was a magic portent, the shadowed wall of granite was a turreted castle of mysteries, vague in the starlight, and the very stars themselves huddled down on him excitingly. He was in a world of the unreal, and must do an unreal thing. He stumbled blindly back to camp. He was surprised to find Mrs. Laithe as he had left her, still drooping against the rough-barked tree, weak, submissive, overborne. He touched her arm gently to recall her from some troubled distance. She looked at him with eyes unseeing at first.

"Isn't it bedtime?" he suggested.

She smiled and stood up to shrug away the spell of her dreaming. She spoke with such clear strength of tone that he was at once reassured of her vigor.

"Yes, it's sleeping time—in a moment. I haven't said much to you, but there's really little to say. You feel that you must go?"

"How could I stay here—after that?"

She repressed a sudden spasm of wild, weeping laughter that threatened to overcome her.

"And you'll not come back?" She waited breathless.

"There isn't much chance of it."

"You dear, dear fool!" was on her lips, but she held back the words and said very quietly:

"Go out, then, and live as you must. Only don't let life cow you. Don't ever fear that living is [286] intricate or hard or tragic—a thing to be gone about warily. The wary people make the same mistakes as the careless ones, and feel them ten times more. Don't be afraid to dream—afraid to believe. I'm glad I've dreamed every dream of mine—false or true. Never be afraid to want." She turned half away as if to go, but halted, and he thought she had grown suddenly weak.

"You're going——"

"To-morrow, I'd thought—the sooner the better."

"Ah, but that's so soon. Can't we have one more day here? One more day to think of it?"

"I've thought of it all winter, days and nights as well; but I'd like another day—" He watched her longingly as she went beyond the firelight.

"Not a day to think about it," he called softly—"a day to forget."

They made it a day of forgetting, as he had said. In the morning they planned to ride, and their spirits were such as they rode off that Ben was moved to regard them knowingly, as one who had taken a fling at life in his time.

The day long they rode or rambled, talking of all but obvious things—making it, indeed, a day of forgetting and a day to remember. Deep in the woman's heart stirred an instinct of primal coquetry, an impulse to wield her charm upon him, to make the woman prevail over the man, beating all reason down, blindly, madly. And she yielded to this, watching its effect on him, divining the power of her freshened beauty each time she compelled his eyes. Instinctively she would have had him say, "I give up. I can't go. Let me stay—stay by you!" The natural woman in [287] her fought for that. But reason reigned above the conflict. She knew he would not surrender and knew she would not have him surrender. Still she could not resist that impulse to enchain him, and exulted each time she made him tremble at their nearness.

Not until night had come did the imminence of his going seem to lie upon them. But then it lay with a weight. Together they left the camp and felt a way over the darkened trail to the cabin. Ewing had spoken of packing he must do, of matters in which she might help him.

But when they were in the studio, and he had started a great blaze in the fireplace he sat before it with her, silent. She spoke at length of the packing.

"There's none to do," he answered. "I'm taking scarcely anything—only what I can carry back of the saddle."

Her blood leaped with a quick hope.

"Then you're not going for long—you *will* come back—" But he only shook his head.

"I can't expect to come back." He looked at her with a sudden lighting of his eyes. "Come near to me this once." He moved a stool in front of him. "Sit here, this once."

She sat on the low stool at his feet and felt herself drawn slowly forward until her arms rested on his knees. She laid her head on them, shaken to the heart. Then she felt him bending over her, hovering, sheltering her, and at last, with a long sigh, come to rest, his face buried in her hair. They remained so, immovable, without further speech.

[288] The absurdity of the thing between them had never seemed so egregious to her. The words rang in her mind, burning behind her closed eyes—"It's all a mistake, that. How could you believe it, even you, unused to the world though you are?" But she knew the questions this would bring from him, the doubt that would stay with him; knew she could never satisfy him with less than the truth. For a moment she heard herself telling him this truth, gently, delicately, tenderly. But he spoke, even while she was thinking this.

"I wanted to be here to-night with you, and with her." He raised his head at last, to look at the portrait of his mother. "She understands, I'm sure. And she would have me go—she would have me do as I am doing."

She knew finally, then, that she could never tell him. She ceased all vain considering of that. He was going away from her because of the lie he believed. The truth might come to him some day, but it must never come from her. The certainty brought her a kind of rest. She could fall back on laughter and tears for the thing.

A long time they sat there, speaking little, her head still cradled on his knees. But when the fire died they knew it must be late and rose to go. Ewing looked long at the portrait, then turned to her.

"I'm doing what I would do for her," he said, "and I'm glad I had you both with me this last time. You'll always keep that for me, won't you?" He raised a hand toward the portrait.

"If you wish it," she said.

When they came in sight of the camp fire they stopped and turned to each other. He caught her by the shoulders.

[289] "Good night and good-by!" he whispered.

She tried to speak, but could not for the trembling of her lips. She turned to go, and took a few faltering steps, then flew back, and with a wild gesture, drew him down and pressed his head against her heart.

Ben came sleepily from the cabin next morning as Ewing was about to mount his horse. He had felt at ease about this journey, because of the slender equipment with which Ewing was setting out. An early return was to be inferred.

Ewing held out his hand, and Ben, observing that it was scarce daylight, and that the act could in no way be considered a public scandal, grasped it cordially.

"So long, Kid—and good luck, whatever you're goin' to do!"

"There's a man down in New York needs killing, Ben."

"Now, look a here, Kid, you better look out"—but the practical aspects of the affair at once seized his mind, and he broke off with, "Got your gun?"

"No—a gun's too good for him."

Ben considered this, and became again solicitous.

"Well, look a here, now, you be darned careful. If it's needed, why, do it. But you jest want to remember that New York ain't Hinsdale County. You want to be mighty careful you don't git into some trouble over it."

CHAPTER XXX

[290]

THE HARDEST THING

THE zest had gone from camp life with Ewing's departure, and the cabin was again occupied. Mrs. Laithe filled the days with a sort of blind waiting. It could not end so, she felt, despite the eyes of Kitty Teevan, so watchful of her, and so certain that it had ended. Something must happen. That was the burden of her hope—as vague as a child's hope. She would set no time, nor

would she name the thing. But come it must, and she could wait.

When Beulah Pierce rode by on his way from Pagosa and left their mail one afternoon, she felt no eagerness about it. There could be nothing so soon, she was sure. Virginia brought her some letters and read aloud one from the aunt at Kensington. Then Mrs. Laithe looked through her own letters and found one from Ewing. She did not open it, but rose after a few moments, and walked swiftly over to the lake camp. Only there, alone, could she trust herself.

She read the thing staringly, haltingly, testing each phrase as if it were worded in some strange tongue.

"I can tell you now what I came for," the letter ran, "because the thing will be done before this letter can reach you. It's a thing you want done, but if you had known I meant to do it you would have tried to prevent me, and that would only have distressed us both. But now, when it is all over, you will see that I was the one person in the world to do it for you. Think if you had killed [291] him yourself that night, the pain you would have brought to yourself and to others. It wasn't a woman's work. I would have done it for you then, but I owed him money. I couldn't kill him till I had paid that.

"I used to dream of doing things for you always, many things, big and little, but it has turned out that I can do only this. So won't you try to believe that I am putting all my heart into it for you, all that thing I would have tried to show you if it had been scattered over the rest of our lives? I must put it all into this one act.

"Ben seemed to suspect that such affairs could be managed here with the informality that often marks them in the San Juan, but you and I know better. I cannot expect to return, nor to see you again. Yet I shall see you always; see no one else—while they let me see at all. We must take life as it falls, do the next thing without complaining, even if it is the hardest thing. And be sure of this—I shall do it so quickly that he will have no chance to tell me anything. He will not even speak your name. Afterwards you can have this to remember, that I did it gladly, knowing what the consequences would be. I hope that will be, in time, the happiness to you that it is to me. It is enough for me."

Over and over she read it, and at last she mastered it—all the horror of it. A long time she gazed dumbly at the sheets, then once more she laughed the old, low laugh, with a sinister note in it now. Ben Crider found her there an hour later, staring blankly out over the flawed surface of the lake. The breeze was swirling many finely torn bits of paper about her feet.

As they walked back to the cabin she reflected that the letter had lain four days in the [292] postoffice at Pagosa. It had been written nine days before. Then Ewing had done the thing. She no more believed that Randall Teevan still lived than she believed that the mountains about her were phantoms. A sentence from the letter ran in her mind. "We must take life as it falls—do the next thing without complaining, even if it is the hardest thing."

"The hardest thing!"

She pleaded fatigue and lack of appetite to Virginia and sought her bed to lie and think in the dark. She saw her own hardest thing, the thing she must do.

She had caused a man to be put to death; a vicious, mischievous fool, it was true, but still a man. That was sad and horrible. But of another man, one she had thought to guard and cherish and care for in all of woman's ways—she had made a murderer, and she had murdered him. For she knew that Ewing must die. It was as if he were already dead. Perhaps out there in the agonized void of the world he had already killed himself, his work being done. Or, if not, they would kill him. She felt a blind, hollow sickness, as if her heart had broken and was bleeding away inside her. She had made her beloved a slayer and had slain him. She could not live with it. She hungered for her own death with intolerable desire.

She arose with a despair-cleared mind the next morning, her resolve made. Only the smaller details were to be worked out. She walked by the lake, resolving these. Once she wept, from the very abundance and color of life about her. Life was so full, and she had taken it from him in his splendid youth. But she would not shirk the penalty of her blood-guiltiness. She looked out to the [293] hills beyond the valley that fell away from the lake, studying headland and wooded slope and cañon opening, choked with green. Some spot far out there would be secret and gracious to her—welcome her with a finger on its lips—take her and keep. Death, to her, was no longer terrible. There had been a long intimacy with it. She rushed to the idea of it as to a home—a benignant succor from the unendurable thought.

Back in the cabin she lay counting the minutes as they rushed—thinking and counting. She must not let herself be prisoned by a mere body that exulted blindly, basely, in its vigor. She could make everything right. She could conform to the law of a life for a life.

"The hardest thing," she murmured. "I must do the hardest thing." That would be her expiation, though not a sufficing one; she recognized that. She longed for it too avidly, for the relief from thought, from torturing visions. Yet it was formally perfect as a punishment, according to the world's standards. She would be her own executioner, and it would satisfy the world if the world knew. And despite her longing for release, it was still, she thought, the hardest thing, although it saved—saved her from that old man and that young man slain: that young beloved one, lying dead with blood upon his hands. Poor sacrificed, poor betrayed, poor ruined one! Again, the

hollow sickness, as if her heart were bleeding away inside her. To expiate—to do the hardest thing. She came back to that always. It was the hardest thing, although it saved.

When her brother rode up in the afternoon, she instantly saw her plan completed. There came an hour in which she walked and talked and laughed in a waking dream, without sensation, [294] except as she could imagine it felt by a creature she seemed to watch from afar, a creature who had looked strangely like herself. She saw this woman greet the others and sit at table with them to laugh and talk with acceptable ease. Their voices were soundless as voices in a dream, their shapes and flittings as illogical. So benumbed was her spirit that she suffered little even at the moment of hurried parting from Virginia. Her rôle was played with flawless detachment. She studied herself coolly and guarded against wrong speeches.

"I shall go home with Clarence; I haven't seen that magnificent ranch yet," she remarked carelessly, and Virginia and her brother had applauded this.

"I'll show you a ranch that is a ranch," Bartell had answered.

Ben led Cooney around, saddled. She kissed Virginia lightly and was on the little horse. She turned to wave gayly as she fell in ahead of Bartell on the trail to the lake.

The moon had sailed up over the eastern hills with the going down of the sun, and the shadows were sharply cut in its light. They reined in at the lake, lingering there a moment in its charm. Under the slanting moon rays it shone like another moon, radiantly silver in its setting of cloudlike leafage. She drew a long breath as her brother started on, and called to him.

"Clarence!" He pulled up his horse, looking back at her.

"You'll think me absurd, but I've decided not to go with you, after all. I believe I'd rather stay with Virginia. She'll be lonesome."

He came back to her, scolding whimsically.

"I know I'm foolish," she persisted, "but you're so dreadfully busy and noisy over there."

"Nonsense! And Virgie will be all right. She doesn't need you for a few days." [295]

"I'm sure she'll need me. No—go on alone, there's a dear. I can ride over myself and bring you back for a few days, after your rush is over."

"Well, if you're really set." He submitted, grumbling.

"And kiss me, dear!"

He did so, still grumbling. "And you skip back, if you're going back. You're cold as ice. So long, weathervane! And come over when you feel like it."

"I'll be warm, dear—and good-by."

She watched him down the slope and across the meadow until he vanished into the black of the forest wall. Then she rode on to the camp. Without dismounting she took from the end of a broken branch a revolver in its holster that she had hung there earlier in the day. She made sure again that it was loaded and buckled the holster about her waist.

Turning from the ranch trail, then, she found another that led off to the north and away from the Pagosa road—off into a wooded wilderness of hills where she would be safe from discovery. She halted again on the first ridge above the camp, sitting motionless in the shadow, her eyes on the little moon-flooded opening across the lake where the cabin trail came down to the shore. That was a walk for lovers, but they could not walk there now. After a little time she whirled Cooney about in a sudden gust of fierceness and sent him along the winding ridge, keeping close within the shadow.

When the trail fell away into the first of the unknown valleys she breathed a sigh of relief and release. Her burden was falling from her. She could not again be cheated back from her refuge.

She began to rejoice in the wide, wild sweetness of the night, its piny fragrance, the soft-footed [296] scurryings of its lesser people, the gloom of its sharply defined shadows, and the silvering haze that enveloped the peaks. She came on a deer feeding in the open, and was delighted when it did not run. It only lifted its head to look at her.

She began to rejoice, also, in the cleverness of her plan. As well as she might she had preserved the decencies. A week might ensue before they missed her. Cooney, stripped of his trappings, would appear at the lake cabin, to be laughed at and chided for his desertion of the Bar-B ranch, a week before she was missed; and then she would never be found. There was, indeed, small chance of their having the pain of that. She would keep to the trail as long as the night hid her; then a climb up some unpathed slope, over rocks that would show no trace of her passage; then a tangled thicket, remote, secret, improbable—and the tale of a lost woman, a woman who wandered confusingly far on a night of tempting splendor. She thought of Virginia's pain with a feeble pity. It seemed as if humanity was dead in her.

The narrow trail wound beckoningly before her, the land stretched off to peaks of silver or barren gray slopes or shadowed promontories, glooming above ravines where little rivers turned restlessly in their beds; and over all hung the mystic shimmer of moon rays, softening all angles

and picking the fronds of trees with dancing lights as she passed.

An owl boomed from a dead pine, and a little off the trail she heard the scream of a cougar, like the scream of a woman in some strange terror. But all sounds were indifferently alike to her, the shrilling of the beast, the sibilance of running water, the bellow of the owl, the whistle of a deer, [297] or the throaty mutterings of an awakened bird. She heard them as receding echoes of a life already remote.

She kept Cooney moving as rapidly as the trail permitted, checking his little snatches at the wayside herbage. He could fast with her for one night, she told him. To-morrow he could feast his way home harassed by no rider. He stopped at times to test some doubtful bit of trail with a cautious forefoot; or slowed to feel a sure way down a gullyside of loose stones; or lingered knee deep in a melody of swift water, to drink, with swelling sides. She was glad to have this last night with the little horse that had been Ewing's. Ewing—only not to think of him—for one cannot ride with the heart all bled away.

The light faded from the lower ways after a while. The moon had completed its short arc and fell below the mountain ahead of her; defining sharp little notches in its rim.

The hills seemed to steal upon her in the darkness then, huddling close about her, muffling her with their black plumage. But she was glad of this—surmounting the mere physical oppression of it—for she felt that it doubled the secrecy of her going; and Cooney's eyes, with his skilled feet, sufficed for the trail.

At times she shrank as under the touch of a palpable hand reached out to her from the darkness, a thing that frantically protested, pleaded, expostulated—but she knew it for the hand of mere brute life, a cowardly, blind, soulless thing, that would subvert all fitness. She shook it off, knowing herself its superior by right of mind, with power to inflict justice upon it. And *he* was [298] dead, he, the young and strong—alas, poor slayer, poor slain! How her heart bled away. To expiate——

She clung to that: it was an obligation that lay on her, a secret obligation, but the more imperative for that. She could not hold a forfeited life. She must redeem herself. The hardest thing was demanded of her. And then, one could not go on with this bleeding heart.

"The hardest thing—the hardest thing!" she murmured, shutting her lips tightly on the words, with a sudden inexplicable fear of some flaw in her logic. Again and again she forced the words from her lips with stubborn, deaf insistence, to still some mental voice of inquiry, a passionless, cold thing that lifted itself in her brain, but which she could beat down with this bludgeon of her phrase. She was even bold enough to cross-examine herself presently. The hardest thing was demanded of her, and she was doing the hardest thing. Her hand fell on the laden holster at her side with a panic impulse to rush the thing through. But the touch reassured her and she laughed in the consciousness of her security. She could not be thwarted now, and she need not hurry. She could afford to the very end that deliberate thoroughness with which she had begun. Her will for the thing had lost none of its iron.

An hour or so after the darkness had crowded the hills in upon her she rode into a dense mist, chilling to the bone after the dryness of the early night. The range of her vision was again shortened, and even the little horse halted more frequently to feel his way. Once he seemed to have wandered, and stood a moment in uncertainty. She let him rest, then flicked his shoulder with the bridle rein, and he struggled stanchly on over the ridge of loose gravel where he had halted, feeling for the trail with expert hoofs. He found it a moment later, and was moving [299] forward again. She patted his neck and blessed him for being so "trail wise." He, too, was doing the hardest thing, and doing it faithfully.

She fell again into the rhythm of her battle cry—"The hardest thing—the hardest thing!"

And yet it was not hard. She was so near to it now that she could afford the luxury of this admission. It required only a sense of justice, of moral symmetry. She had taken a life—two, doubtless—and by the law she must pay. But no debtor could have had a willinger spirit. And she would not be paying too much. She recalled certain homely words of an old man whose life she had watched out, a man whose worn, seamed face showed his right to speak.

"Experience, lady, a dear thing sometimes—yes—but never too dear. It is worth always just what we pay for it. It is had at slightest cost, high or low. No other thing is like it thus. All else of the world may cheat us in their price, but not experience. Our fee shall vary as we are quick to learn, but the good God teaches us what we must know at flat cost, as says the merchant, with never the penny of profit. This it saves much to know—much sorrowing, much whining. It would make us wise—so!"

"So!" She echoed his rich guttural imitatively and laughed as she drew in a deep breath of the damp air. She was numb with the cold now, and laughed at foolish life for registering so petty a discomfort at such a moment. The humor of it came home to her—that she should sensually feel the cold.

Another span of hours the little horse strode on at his quick step, valiantly lifting her up steep ascents, or descending the sides of ravines with devoted sureness of foot, treading narrow ways [300] where she could feel that he hugged the bush-lined bank, and knew that a fall lay the other side.

"The hardest thing—the hardest thing!" Again she muttered it, beating at her purpose. And

again, that mental, passionless query lifted its head. Strike it down as she would, its cool, curious eyes were always on her, not denying, not disputing, only questioning, calmly but implacably, until her soul seemed to writhe in loyalty to her motives, holding them sacred even from questioning.

"The hardest thing"—but her brain rang with the relentless question—"are you doing it because it is the hardest thing or because you want to do it?"

"I am doing it because I want to do the hardest thing."

"A quibble!"

She set her lips, shut her eyes, even to the darkness, and tried to deafen her ears to the sounding thing. A long time she rode so. And then she wept because she was alone and cold and dying and unsuccored by the only one who could have comforted her.

"I would never, never have left *you*!" she called back toward Ewing, with the first reproach she had ever given him. Her voice had a broken sweetness like that of a child speaking through tears. "I'd never have let you be so cold! I'd have stayed—stayed by you—warmed you—comforted you!"

But after a little her tears ceased, as an unpitied child wears out its crying, and her eyes closed again as she laughed at her own sad lack of reason.

When she opened her eyes again she gave a little gasping cry of relief. The black of the night [301] had faded to gray. A dull, dark, opaque gray it was, but ghosts of the land already bulked massively through it; shrouded, vague shapes without line. And the spirit of her purpose quickened as she looked.

Slowly the mist lightened, still opaque but silver now, and presently she saw the murky face of a nearby rock and could trace the cedar that twisted outward from its summit. They were amazing shapes to her, so long had she seemed to live in the dark, and she named them over, wonderingly—"A tree, a rock—a rock, a tree!"

Again the question struck at her: "You want to do the hardest thing?"

"I *must* do the hardest thing—it only happens that I also wish to."

"Is there nothing harder than what you are doing?"

Again she shut her eyes and set her lips, but the voice came with merciless insistence.

"*What* would be harder than dying?"

Then she threw back her head and challenged the voice.

"*Living!* To live would be harder." She made the confession without flinching, even with a laugh, and a weight dropped from her.

"Then you are not doing the hardest thing—not doing it—not doing the hardest thing!"

She coolly scanned the descending bed of a creek that the trail now crossed. The ravine widened below, and she saw that an ascent would be practicable farther down. It was time, then, to leave the trail. If the impossible should happen, if by some chance or trick of woodcraft they tracked her all the miles of her night-long ride, they must lose her here.

She turned Cooney down the shallow stream with a furtive smile of pride in her own craft. He [302] splashed through the water, stumbling over the submerged bowlders, but always recovering himself, and picking a sure way over the creek bed.

The cool gray of the mist-steaming water reminded her that she was thirsty, but she would stop for nothing now. She knew herself for a coward at last, guilty of a cowardice hideously selfish. She had planned her act to be remote, secret, undiscoverable. But now she faced squarely the grief her loss would be to others.

But the sting would pass. And she had her own right—her own obligation to meet. She had killed—she had killed her love—and she could not live. There was service she might have performed through the years, but others would perform it now, quite as acceptably. A gnat dropping from the ephemeral human swarm could be nothing but a gnat the less. She no longer pretended to call it the hardest thing. "But it's the next hardest," she pleaded to herself. Her lips quivered, but she stilled the spasm with a gust of fierce resolving to be done with the thing quickly.

The shelving bank along which the stream had wound now fell away, and she could dimly make out a draw between two hills where she might ascend. She chose a place of broken stone and loose gravel for Cooney to clamber out, so that he might leave no sign even to a searcher who had come this far. Then, ascending the draw a little distance, she turned and sent him up the side of the lesser hill. The mist still shut her in, but she could make out that the woods were denser on this hill.

Cooney made his way through a growth of the thick, wet buck brush, then between white files [303] of the quaking aspen, and at last into the heavier wooded forest where his feet slipped and slid on the yielding pine needles as he climbed. The hill lengthened before her in gradual ascents, broken by terraces, and the way was rough with bowlders and fallen trees and the clutching

tangle of undergrowth. But the mist, receding before her, revealed aisles of the wood farther on that allured her. She would be thorough. Ahead of her were ruddy, yellow hints of the sun, striking down through the green arches of the forest.

At last she saw that she had reached the summit of the hill. "It is the place," she said, then reined in and dismounted by a clump of bushes. She found herself stiffened by the cold, and a sudden fear of failing force seized her. She stamped on the ground until she felt warmth in her feet again, and the stirred blood mounting through her. She drew a great breath and straightened her body with a consciousness of its strength and wealth of life. "It is the place," she repeated.

CHAPTER XXXI

[304]

THE MISSION OF EWING

IN a dingy little bedroom of a dingy little hotel in one of the lesser avenues of New York Ewing sat waiting for his hour. He had sealed his letter to Mrs. Laithe with the feeling that this was the last intelligible word he could say to anyone. Henceforth he must be silent; refuse reasons. He must let them devise reasons for him. Any but the true reason would suffice.

When darkness came on he went out into the noisy street, mailing the letter as he passed through the hotel office. Then, by unfamiliar thoroughfares he made his way to Ninth Street and resumed his old vigil in front of Teevan's house.

There were lights in the house, both above and below. The thing was not, then, to be attempted at the moment. He walked for an hour through squalid streets to the west and came back to his post. The house was still alight. Teevan, apparently, was entertaining. He watched but a moment, then returned to his hotel and went to bed. He could be patient, and he must be thorough. Before extinguishing his light he made sure that he had not lost what was now his most important possession: a key to Teevan's door. Teevan had bestowed it on him the year before, in order that he might obtain books during the little man's absence from town. Ewing had forgotten the key until he set on his present mission; then he had perceived a use for it.

[305]

He fell asleep, despite the recurrent tumult of elevated trains outside his window; fell asleep thinking of Teevan. There was no bitterness in his heart toward the little man. It was only necessary that he die.

He kept closely to his room the next day, wishing not to be recognized by any of his acquaintances, and he was at his post early in the evening. This time the house was dark. Teevan was out, but he would return. So he paced back and forth through Ninth Street, going only so far as would let him keep the house in view. He felt no impatience. It was his last work, and he could bide the time when it might be well done. A little after midnight two men entered the street from Fifth Avenue, strolling leisurely in the warm June night, and ascended the steps of the Teevan house. Ewing felt a slight tingling of relief when he recognized Teevan, but then he saw the other take a key from his pocket, and he knew that this would be Teevan's son. They went in together, and the watcher left his post. He must have Teevan alone in the house.

He walked on with strange echoes from another time—from another world, it seemed, sounding in his ears. The sight of Teevan, the tones of his voice, faintly heard, seemed to awaken him from some dream in which he walked, awaken him to a time when the little man was his good friend. He felt a sudden nausea, but then he raised his eyes to the Bartell house opposite and was himself again. He crossed the street and stood a moment before the door, seeing his lady there, seeing her again as he had seen her that night in Teevan's grasp, striving with Teevan, weakly, but with the killing light in her eyes. The vision convinced him. The other time had been the time of dream. He had not been awake until now.

[306]

Again he slept and again he passed a day of waiting. That night there were no lights in the house, but also no returning master, though he waited until the night was far on. Yet he went to sleep in all patience, knowing he had only to wait.

On the fourth night there were lights again, but about ten o'clock he saw Teevan's two servants leave. He walked on, to avoid recognition by them. When he returned a man was leaving the house. He thought this might be Teevan, but when the figure had descended the steps and passed under the street lamp he saw it to be Teevan's son. Still he waited. He must be sure.

After half an hour the lights in the lower part of the house went out, save one that shone dimly through the fanlight over the door. A moment later two windows on the floor above leaped ruddily into view and he saw a shadow pass across them. This was Teevan's room, and Teevan was doubtless there, alone at last.

He did not cross the street directly, but walked east to the end of the block and came back on

the other side. As he passed the Bartell house he opened and closed his hands tensely, recalling Ben's suggestion about a weapon. His bare hands were sufficing weapons.

He went up the steps and softly turned his key in the lock. The door yielded noiselessly to his push and he was in the hall. Unconsciously he took off his hat and was about to leave it, but then he smiled and replaced it firmly on his head. He stood listening a moment. There was no sound. Then, very slowly, taking each step with caution, he mounted the thickly carpeted stairs.

So intent was he on his purpose that he felt no anxiety, no excitement. As he halted at the head of the stairs to listen again, he thrilled only with the need for perfect silence, a thing he would [307] have felt in the same degree if his quarry had been a deer in some green cover of the hills. Still without a sound he felt his way to the door of Teevan's room. The door was open and light from it glowed dimly into the hall. He paused within the shadow and peered into the room. He could see the desk but not the man who sat before it. Of him he could see only an arm and hand—writing at the moment. Presently the hand dropped its pen and took up a tall glass that stood near. The glass ascended and passed beyond the watcher's range of vision. The hand brought it back, empty, a moment later, and resumed the pen once more.

He took a step forward and brought the room into view. Teevan sat at the desk, his head bent and half turned away. Ewing coolly noted his position. He seemed smaller than ever, smaller and older. But now no time must be wasted.

Ewing stepped through the doorway with noiseless tread and took one long step toward the desk. Teevan turned his head and looked up. His eyes rested on Ewing, at first vacantly, his mind still busied with the matter of his writing. Ewing thrilled with a sudden alertness, his purpose growing in his eyes, his hands tensely closing and unclosing. Teevan started back from the desk, conscious now of the intruder's menace. Yet such was the cool fixedness of Ewing's gaze, the hypnotic tenseness of his crouch, that the little man made no sound; only stared as one under a spell, the pen still held in his poised hand.

Only when the crouching figure leaped toward him did his lips open. But then, what would have been a cry of terror became a mere gurgling snarl, for Ewing's hands had met about his throat [308] with unerring deftness. Teevan was half-raised from the chair, his head was forced back, and for an instant his eyes met Ewing's in full consciousness. Then his mouth opened wide, but not for speech, and his eyes rolled in the agony of that choking grip. Ewing felt the thing writhe in his clutch, then felt a sudden terrible relaxation, and his pressure ceased in unthinking response to this. He stood a moment, holding the limp form, then dropped it in the chair, feeling himself sicken at the sheer physical horror of what he was doing. There was no pity for Teevan—only for the animal that suffered. He had had to kill a dog once and his loathing of that deed was like this. Teevan's head lay over on his shoulder, his face distorted and purple, his eyes upturned and fixed in a hideous stare. The fine little hands hung limply down.

At the moment Ewing believed his task was done, but then he was dismayed by a gasping, indrawn breath and the convulsive shuddering of Teevan's chest. The little man was breathing again, though still unconscious. The dog had shown this same horrible tenacity. He must do the thing all over again. He bent over the figure, again fixing his grip nicely at the throat. He would make sure this time. Then nerving himself to exert the needed pressure, he turned his eyes away —he could not look at the face in its death agony—turned his eyes away and found himself staring stupidly at Alden Teevan, who stood inside the door. They gazed at each other a moment until Ewing had appraised the significance of this interruption. It meant only that he would be swiftly apprehended, for he knew that Alden Teevan could not save his father. He had not changed his [309] position, still bending over the little man, still fingering his throat. He was conscious of an increase in his purpose; this hint of opposition would enable him to kill Teevan with a better spirit. He spoke and his voice was only a little hoarse under the strain.

"I'm killing your father. I don't want to hurt you, but you mustn't try to stop me. If you do, by God! I'll kill both of you. If you keep away I'll go with you after I've done it. I promise that."

He turned again to the livid face beneath him. But the younger Teevan called sharply to him, though with only irritation in his voice:

"Stop! Don't be an ass! You're making an ass of yourself!"

Ewing only stared at him. The other came a step nearer in his eagerness.

"You'll be sorry if you don't listen to me. You're a fool, I tell you."

Ewing smiled confidently, bitterly, not relaxing his hold of the little man's throat.

"I'm not doing it for myself."

"All the more fool!"

"For some one who couldn't do it—who has reason to do it."

The other came nearer, clutching Ewing's sleeve with gentle persuasion and speaking with quick intensity.

"Ah, so that's it—she never told you! But you're a fool. She had no reason—she was merely trying to save you from the truth about your mother, and she has let you believe his lies about herself. What a rotten fool you were to think that contemptible little mucker could ever have been

anything to her. He lied to you, do you hear me? Lied to you about her, and she let you believe it —a fool herself for doing that—so you wouldn't know the truth about your own mother." [310]

Slowly Ewing unclasped his hands from the throat of Teevan and stood facing the son. Two phrases rang in his ears: "He lied to you about her—the truth about your mother." He put up a hand to loosen his collar. It seemed now as if he himself were being choked.

"The truth about my mother—*what* truth about my mother?"

"Sit down there."

"*What* truth about my mother?"

"Come—get hold of yourself. The truth that your mother happened to be my mother."

Ewing passed a hand over his face, as if to awaken himself from some trance in which he had moved.

"Sit down there."

He felt for a chair now and sank awkwardly into it, repeating dazedly:

"My mother was your mother—" He could get no meaning from the words. The other answered sharply:

"Your mother married my father. She left him for your father when I was a baby. Do you understand that? Mrs. Laithe knew it. He knew it—" He pointed toward the limp but breathing figure in the chair—"and she was afraid he would tell you."

He tried to take it in.

"My mother—his wife? Ah—you—you are my brother."

"That's beside the point; but if it means anything to you, listen to me—try to understand."

Again and again he told the thing point by point, as simply as he could, while his listener stared curiously at him. The figure in the chair stirred, the head rolled, the breathing became quieter and more even, but neither gave any heed to this. [311]

At last the incredible thing began to shape itself in Ewing's mind, but it was not until the very last, and then it came as a sudden blinding illumination. The man in the chair drew a long, shuddering breath and opened his eyes on them. Ewing at the same moment caught the full force of the little man's deceit. He had felt no anger toward Teevan before, but now rage grew within him as he remembered what the woman had suffered. He sprang toward Teevan, feeling no longer a specific desire to kill, but only a mad impulse to beat down and blindly destroy.

"You lied about her!" he cried, towering above the little man with clenched, threatening fists. If Teevan had retorted, had raised a hand, or betrayed anything but abject fear, shrinking in his chair, turning eyes of appeal to his son, Ewing would have vented his rage. But this died into mere loathing as he looked. Teevan was near to whimpering, in his fear. Ewing turned away with a gesture of repulsion.

"That's best, after all," remarked the son coolly.

"Doubtless he deserves kicking more than any unkicked man alive, but you'll be glad you didn't do it."

Ewing shot another look at Teevan, and then said, almost as if to himself.

"How wise my mother was!" He turned again to the little man with a sudden blaze of scorn.

"And you believed I could think less of her for leaving you—leaving you for a *man*!" Teevan merely closed his eyes and cautiously raised a hand to his neck.

"You'll be glad you let him off," repeated the son, "and so will she. She wouldn't have you——" [312]

"Ah—she!" It was a cry of remembrance. "Why—she's—" He broke off, glowing with a strange illumination. "Why, I left her——"

A moment longer he stood, like a sleeper wakened, then rushed from the room.

CHAPTER XXXII [313]

THE TURNING OF COONEY

WHEN she again felt sure of her strength she began to unsaddle Cooney. The cinches bothered her stiffened fingers, but she had them worked loose at last, and lifted the heavy saddle off, smiling grimly at her own strength. When she took off the blanket she warmed her hands a moment in its heat. Then she stripped off the bridle, and the little horse, after a moment's mouthing to rest his jaws from the bit, fell to grazing. As he seemed inclined to stay by her, she broke a switch from one of the nearby bushes and cut him sharply. Even after this he galloped off but a little way, with astonished, resentful shakings of his head. She had wanted him to be on his way back over the miles he had come before the thing was done.

She glanced shrewdly about her. She was far away from the cabin, a night's ride at Cooney's best trail pace, and in a region rough and untraveled, except as an occasional way to the lower valleys. There were no trails about her, no dead camp fires, no trees rimmed by the axe or scarred by a "blaze." There was life enough of a sort; jays called harshly, and squirrels barked their alarm; and half a dozen grouse eyed her from a few yards' distance, with a sort of half-timid stupidity. But there was no life to touch hers. She walked about the chosen thicket, admiring its denseness, not notable in any way, but casual, improbable to the searching eye. [314]

"The hardest thing!" It was satire now, and she murmured it as such, done with all fighting. It was good to anticipate the thing, the restfulness of extinction—or not, as that might be. That was no matter. She was beaten in this life. It was good to know that in a moment she would feel as little as Randall Teevan—or as much. She unconsciously drew herself up at the thought of facing that withered fop.

She rejoiced in the warming air. She would take a long breath of it, and then the triumphant exit. She stepped a few paces forward to peer about a low-growing spruce that had shaded her. She had a last fancy for following the echo of her shot to the farther valley wall.

As she lifted the curtain boughs the sun dazzled her. She would see its golden points, she thought, when she shut her eyes in the thicket. She shut them quickly now, to prove this, and saw the myriad dancing lights.

As she opened her eyes again and turned to draw back into the wood there was imprinted curiously on her recovering vision a silhouette of the lake cabin. She shut them quickly again, dreading memories she was forever done with, and laughing in the certainty that the cabin was miles away. Then she looked again, blinking dazedly in the sunlight, and the cabin loomed before her across the clearing.

As she stared desperately, her mind roused to frantic denials, her eyes straining to banish this monstrous figment, the door of the cabin opened and Ewing came out. She sprang forward with an impulse to shatter the illusion by some quick movement. But her eyes still beheld him, bareheaded, turning his face up to the sun. He stretched his arms and drew deep breaths. He had never seemed so tall. His look had a kind of triumph in it. [315]

She swayed under the shock of the thing, feeling herself grow faint. Cooney had betrayed her. Some time in the night, at one of those confusing bends in the trail, he had turned. He had brought her home.

Ewing's head had turned as she moved; his eyes were on her. She saw the rapt gladness in his face and beheld him approach her across the clearing. She managed another step or two and gained the support of a felled tree. As Ewing came up she essayed a little smile of nonchalance.

"Cooney—" she begun. The word came itself, but she felt easier under the sound of her own voice and went on—"Cooney came with me. I didn't go at all. I rode—but you see—" She beamed on him with explanatory embarrassment—"I took an early morning ride—it was so pleasant—and I thought I was lost—indeed I did, and I took off his saddle. I left it right there—" She pointed with the literal exactness of a child in its narrative of adventure—"right there behind that tree, and then I found I was—found I was closer to home than I thought."

He had not seemed to hear her, but stood looking narrowly, as if she were still far away. Gradually his eyes widened, as if he were drawing her close to him. He took a step toward her, with arms half raised.

"I'm so ashamed—" he muttered; "but you—you let me think that."

His voice brought her to sudden agonized alarm. The blood ebbed from her face and she almost staggered toward him.

"Did you do it—do *that*?" she whispered, ready to fall. [316]

"No; I found out in time. I found out everything—everything you didn't tell me." He was shaken with longing, yet shamed into restraint before her.

"I'm so ashamed—I came as soon as I could to tell you. I rode all night to be here, to tell you as soon as I could."

"You didn't do it—you didn't do it?" she insisted pitifully.

"I stopped in time." She muttered this over and over, and at last the truth struggled into her chilled brain.

"You dear, dear fool!" she said with a little sobbing laugh.

Again his arms were half raised to her, but she turned swiftly and ran to Cooney, who had fallen to grazing a little way off, throwing her arms about his neck and weeping out incoherent words of endearment.

Ewing gathered his strength, like a wrestler who has been pressed to the ground, but lifts himself with infinite effort, and went resolutely toward her. Gently he unclasped her arms from Cooney's neck.

THE END

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Transcriber's Note:

Spelling, grammar, punctuation and hyphenation have been retained as in the original publication except as follows:

Page 9	you'll *git* somewhur's, I says you'll *git* somewhur's,' I says
Page 14	comsummation of this mild adventure *changed to* consummation of this mild adventure
Page 23	considered is so quietly *changed to* considered it so quietly
	front of "art emporiums." on *changed to* front of "art emporiums," on
Page 33	rainment was donned *changed to* raiment was donned
Page 48	sasshaying down Fifth Avenue *changed to* sashaying down Fifth Avenue
Page 50	that man every marry *changed to* that man ever marry
Page 84	vista of heartshaking surprises *changed to* vista of heart-shaking surprises
Page 133	latest golf and yatching news *changed to* latest golf and yachting news
Page 243	slay me an you will *changed to* slay me an' you will
Page 292	walked by the lake, revolving *changed to* walked by the lake, resolving
Page 311	with a gesture of replusion *changed to* with a gesture of repulsion

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