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THE SICK-A-BED LADY



"That will help you remember where
your mouth is"

THE SICK-A-BED LADY

AND ALSO
HICKORY DOCK, THE VERY TIRED GIRL,
THE HAPPY-DAY, SOMETHING THAT
HAPPENED IN OCTOBER, THE
AMATEUR LOVER, HEART OF
THE CITY, THE PINK SASH,
WOMAN'S ONLY BUSINESS

By
ELEANOR HALLOWELL ABBOTT

Author of "Molly Make-Believe"

Illustrated



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TO
THE MEMORY OF
TWO FATHERS

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THE SICK-A-BED LADY

[3]



HE Sick-A-Bed Lady lived in a huge old-fashioned mahogany bedstead, with solid silk sheets, and three great squashy silk pillows edged with fluffy ruffles. On a table beside the Sick-A-Bed Lady was a tiny little, shiny little bell that tinkled exactly like silver raindrops on a golden roof, and all around this Lady and this Bedstead and this Bell was a big, square, shadowy room with a smutty fireplace, four small paned windows, and a chintzy wall-paper showered profusely with high-handled baskets of lavender flowers over which strange green birds hovered languidly.

The Sick-A-Bed Lady, herself, was as old as twenty, but she did not look more than fifteen with her little wistful white face against the creamy pillows and her soft brown hair braided in two thick pigtails and tied with great pink bows behind each ear.

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When the Sick-A-Bed Lady felt like sitting up high against her pillows, she could look out across the footboard through her opposite window. Now through that opposite window was a marvelous vista—an old-fashioned garden, millions of miles of ocean, and then—France! And when the wind was in just the right direction there was a perfectly wonderful smell to be smelled—part of it was Cinnamon Pink and part of it was Salt-Sea-Weed, but most of it, of course, was—France. There were days and days, too, when any one with sense could feel that the waves beat perkily against the shore with a very strong French accent, and that all one's French verbs, particularly "*J'aime, Tu aimes, Il aime,*" were coming home to rest. What else was there to think about in bed but funny things like that?

It was the Old Doctor who had brought the Sick-A-Bed Lady to the big white house at the edge of the Ocean, and placed her in the cool, quaint room with its front windows quizzing dreamily out to sea, and its side windows cuddled close to the curving village street. It was a long, tiresome, dangerous journey, and the Sick-A-Bed Lady in feverish fancy had moaned: "I shall die, I shall die, I shall *die,*" every step of the way, but, after all, it was the Old Doctor who did the dying! Just like a snap of the finger he went at the end of two weeks, and the Sick-A-Bed Lady rallied to the shock with a plaintive: "Seems to me he was in an *awful* hurry," and fell back on her soft bed into days of unconsciousness that were broken only by riotous visions day and night of an old man rushing frantically up to a great white throne yelling: "One, two, three, for Myself!"

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Out of this trouble the Sick-A-Bed Lady woke one day to find herself quite alone and quite alive. She had often felt alone before, but it was a long time since she had felt alive. The world seemed very pleasant. The flowers on the wall-paper were still unwilted, and the green paper birds hung airily without fatigue. The room was full of the most enticing odor of cinnamon pinks, and by raising herself up in bed the merest trifle she could get a smell of good salt, a smell which somehow you couldn't get unless you actually *saw* the Ocean, but just as she was laboriously tugging herself up an atom higher, trying to find the teeniest, weeniest sniff of France, everything went suddenly black and silver before her eyes, and she fell down, down, down, as much as forty miles into Nothing At All.

When she woke up again all limp and wappsy there was a Young Man's Face on the Footboard of the bed; just an isolated, unconnected sort of face that might have blossomed from the footboard, or might have been merely a mirage on the horizon. Whatever it was, though, it kept staring at her fixedly, balancing itself all the while most perfectly on its chin. It was a funny sight, and while the Sick-A-Bed Lady was puckering her forehead trying to think out what it all meant the Young Man's Face smiled at her and said "*Boo!*" and the Sick-A-Bed Lady tiptilted her chin weakly and said—"Boo *yourself!*" Then the Sick-A-Bed Lady fell into her fearful stupor again, and the Young Man's Face ran home as fast as it could to tell its Best Friend that the Sick-A-Bed Lady had spoken her first sane word for five weeks. He thought it was a splendid victory, but when he

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tried to explain it to his friend, he found that "Boo *yourself*" seemed a fatuous proof of so startling a truth, and was obliged to compromise with considerable dignity on the statement: "Well, of course, it wasn't so much what she said as the *way* she said it."

For days and days that followed, the Sick-A-Bed Lady was conscious of nothing except the Young Man's Face on the footboard of the bed. It never seemed to wobble, it never seemed to waver, but just stayed there perfectly balanced on the point of its chin, watching her gravely with its blue, blue eyes. There was a cleft in its chin, too, that you could have stroked with your finger if—you could have. Of course, there were some times when she went to sleep, and some times when she just seemed to go *out* like a candle, but whenever she came back from *anything* there was always the Young Man's Face for comfort. [7]

The Sick-A-Bed Lady was so sick that she thought all over her body instead of in her head, so that it was very hard to concentrate any particular thought in her mouth, but at last one afternoon with a mighty struggle she opened her half-closed eyes, looked right in the Young Man's Face and said: "Got any arms?"

The Young Man's Face nodded perfectly politely, and smiled as he raised two strong, lean hands to the edge of the footboard, and hunched his shoulders obligingly across the sky line.

"How do you feel?" he asked very gently.

Then the Sick-A-Bed Lady knew at once that it was the Young Doctor, and wondered why she hadn't thought of it before.

"Am I pretty sick?" she whispered deferentially.

"Yes—I think you are *very pretty*—sick," said the Young Doctor, and he towered up to a terrible, leggy height and laughed joyously, though there was almost no sound to his laugh. Then he went over to the window and began to jingle small bottles, and the Sick-A-Bed Lady lay and watched him furtively and thought about his compliment, and wondered why when she wanted to smile and say "Thank you" her mouth should shut tight and her left foot wiggle, instead. [8]

When the Young Doctor had finished jingling bottles, he came and sat down beside her and fed her something wet out of a cool spoon, which she swallowed and swallowed and swallowed, feeling all the while like a very sick brown-eyed dog that couldn't wag anything but the far-away tip of its tail. When she got through swallowing she wanted very much to stand up and make a low bow, but instead she touched the warm little end of her tongue to the Young Doctor's hand. After that, though, for quite a few minutes her brain felt clean and tidy, and she talked quite pleasantly to the Young Doctor: "Have you got any bones in your arms?" she asked wistfully.

"Why, yes, indeed," said the Young Doctor, "rather more than the usual number of bones. Why?"

"I'd give my life," said the Sick-A-Bed Lady, "if there were bones in my silky pillows." She faltered a moment and then continued bravely: "Would you mind—holding me up stiff and strong for a second? There's no bottom to my bed, there's no top to my brain, and if I can't find a hard edge to something I shall topple right off the earth. So would you mind holding me like an *edge* for a moment—that is—if there's no lady to care? I'm not a little girl," she added conscientiously —"I'm twenty years old." [9]

So the Young Doctor slipped over gently behind her and lifted her limp form up into the lean, solid curve of his arm and shoulder. It wasn't exactly a sumptuous corner like silken pillows, but it felt as glad as the first rock you strike on a life-swim for shore, and the Sick-A-Bed Lady dropped right off to sleep sitting bolt upright, wondering vaguely how she happened to have two hearts, one that fluttered in the usual place, and one that pounded rather noisily in her back somewhere between her shoulder-blades.

On his way home that day the Young Doctor stopped for a long while at his Best Friend's house to discuss some curious features of the Case.

"Anything new turned up?" asked the Best Friend.

"Nothing," said the Young Doctor, pulling moodily at his cigar.

"Well, it certainly beats *me*," exclaimed the Best Friend, "how any long-headed, shrewd old fellow like the Old Doctor could have brought a raving fever patient here and installed her in his own house under that clumsy Old Housekeeper without once mentioning to any one who the girl was, or where to communicate with her people. Great Heavens, the Old Doctor knew what a poor 'risk' he was. He knew absolutely that that heart of his would burst some day like a firecracker." [10]

"The Old Doctor never was very communicative," mused the Young Doctor, with a slight grimace that might have suggested professional memories not strictly pleasant. "But I'll surely never forget him as long as ether exists," he added whimsically. "Why, you'd have thought the old chap invented ether—you'd have thought he ate it, drank it, bathed in it. I hope the *smell* of my profession will never be the only part of it I'm willing to share."

"That's all right," said the Best Friend, "that's all right. If he wanted to go off every Winter to the States and work in the Hospitals, and come back every Spring smelling like a Surgical Ward, with a lot of wonderful information which he kept to himself, why, that was his own business. He was a plucky old fellow anyway to go at all. But what I'm kicking at is his wicked carelessness in

bringing this young girl here in a critical illness without taking a single soul into his confidence. Here he's dead and buried for weeks, and the Girl's people are probably worrying themselves crazy about not hearing from her. But why don't they write? Why in thunder don't they write?"

"Don't ask me!" cried the Young Doctor nervously. "I don't know! I don't know anything about it. Why, I don't even know whether the Girl is going to live. I don't even know whether she'll ever be sane again. How can I stop to quiz about her name and her home, when, perhaps, her whole life and reason rests in my foolish hands that have never done anything yet much more vital than usher a perfectly willing baby into life, or tinker with croup in some chunky throat? There's only one thing in the case that I'm sure of, and that is that she doesn't know herself who she is, and the effort to remember might snap her utterly. She's just a thread."

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"I have an idea—" the Young Doctor shook his shoulders as though to shake off his more somber thoughts—"I have an idea that the Old Doctor rather counted on building up a sort of informal sanitarium here. He was daft, you know, about the climate on this particular stretch of coast. You remember that he brought home some athlete last Summer—pretty bad case of breakdown, too, but the Old Doctor cured him like a magician; and the Spring before that there was a little lad with epilepsy, wasn't there? The Old Doctor let me look at him once just to tease me. And before that—I can count up half-a-dozen people of that sort, people whom you would have said were 'gone-ers,' too. Oh, the Old Doctor would have brought home a dead man to cure if any one had 'stumped' him. And I guess this present case was a 'stump' fast enough. Why, she was raging like a prairie fire when they brought her here. No other man would have dared to travel. And they put her down in a great silk bed like a fairy-story, and the Old Doctor sat and watched her night and day studying her like a fiend, and she got better after a while: not keen, you know, but funny like a child, cooing and crooning over her pretty room, and tickled to pieces with the ocean, and vain as a kitten over her pink ribbons—the Old Doctor wouldn't let them cut her hair—and everything went on like that, till in a horrid flash the Old Doctor dropped dead that morning at the breakfast table, the little girl went loony again, and every possible clew to her identity was wiped off the earth!"

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"No baggage?" suggested the Best Friend.

"Why, of course, there was baggage!" the Young Doctor exclaimed, "a great trunk. Haven't the Housekeeper and I rummaged and rummaged it till I can feel the tickle of lace across my wrists even in my sleep? Why, man alive! she's a *rich* girl. There never were such clothes in our town before. She's no free hospital pauper whom the Old Doctor obligingly took off their hands. That is, I don't see how she can be!"

"Oh, well," he continued bitterly, "everybody in town calls her just the Sick-A-Bed Lady, and pretty soon it will be the Death-Bed Lady, and then it will be the Dead-and-Buried Lady—and that's all we'll ever know about it." He shivered clammily as he finished and reached for a scorching glass of whisky on the table.

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But the Young Doctor did not feel so lugubrious the next day and the next and the next, when he found the Sick-A-Bed Lady rallying slowly but surely to the skill of his head and hands. To be frank, she still lay for hours at a time in a sort of gentle daze watching the world go by without her, but little by little her body strengthened as a wilted flower freshens in water, and little by little she struggled harder for words that even then did not always match her thoughts.

The village continued to speculate about her lost identity, but the Young Doctor seemed to worry less and less about it as time went on. If the sweetest little girl you ever saw knew perfectly whom you meant when you said "Dear," what was the use of hunting up such prosy names as May or Alice? And as to her funny speeches, was there anything in the world more piquant than to be called a "beautiful horse," when she meant a "kind doctor"? Was there anything dearer than her absurd wrath over her blunders, or the way she shook her head like an angry little heifer, when she occasionally forgot altogether how to talk? It was at one of these latter times that the Young Doctor, watching her desperate struggle to focus her speech, forgot all about her twenty years and stooped down suddenly and kissed her square on her mouth.

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"There," he laughed, "*that* will help you remember where your mouth is!" But it was astonishing after that how many times he had to remind her.

He couldn't help loving her. No man could have helped loving her. She was so little and dear and gentle and—lost.

The Sick-A-Bed Lady herself didn't know who she was, but she would have perished with fright if she had realized that no one in the village, and not even the Young Doctor himself, could guess her identity.

The Young Doctor knew everything else in the world; why shouldn't he know who she was? He knew all about France being directly opposite the house; he had known it ever since he was a boy, and had been glad about it. He stopped her trying to count the green birds on the wall-paper because he "knew positively" that there were four hundred and seventeen whole birds, and nineteen half birds cut off by the wainscoting. He never laughed at her when she slid down the side of her bed by the village street window, and went to sleep with her curly head pillowed on the hard, white sill. He never laughed, because he understood perfectly that if you hung one white arm down over the sidewalk when you went to sleep, sometimes little children would come and put flowers in your hand, or, more wonderful still, perhaps, a yellow collie dog would come and lick your fingers.

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Nothing could surprise the Young Doctor. Sometimes the Sick-A-Bed Lady took thoughts she did have and mixed them up with thoughts she didn't have, and *sprung* them on the poor Young Doctor, but he always said, "Why, of *course*," as simply as possible.

But more than all the other wise things he knew was the wise one about smelly things. He knew that when you were very, very, *very* sick, nothing pleased you so much as nice, smelly things. He brought wild strawberries, for instance, not so much to eat as to smell, but when he wasn't looking she gobbled them down as fast as she could. And he brought her all kinds of flowers, one or two at a time, and seemed so disappointed when she just sniffed them and smiled; but one day he brought her a spray of yellow jasmine, and she snatched it up and kissed it and cried "*Home*," and the Young Doctor was so pleased that he wrote it right down in a little book and ran away to study up something. He let her smell the fresh green bank-notes in his pocketbook. Oh, they were good to smell, and after a while she said "Shops." He brought her a tiny phial of gasoline from his neighbor's automobile, and she crinkled up her nose in disgust and called it "gloves" and slapped it playfully out of his hand. But when he brought her his riding-coat she rubbed her cheek against it and whispered some funny chirruppy things. His pipe, though, was the most confusing symbol of all. It was his best pipe, too, and she snuggled it up to her nose and cried "*You, y-o-u!*" and hid it under her pillow and wouldn't give it back to him, and though he tried her a dozen times about it, she never acknowledged any association except that joyous, "*Y-o-u!*"

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So day by day she gained in consecutive thought till at last she grew so reasonable as to ask: "Why do you call me *Dear?*"

And the Young Doctor forgot all about his earliest reason and answered perfectly simply: "Because I love you."

Then some of the evenings grew to be almost sweetheart evenings, though the Sick-A-Bed Lady's fragile childishness keyed the Young Doctor into an almost uncanny tenderness and restraint.

Those were wonderful evenings, though, after the Sick-A-Bed Lady began to get better and better. A good deal of the Young Doctor's practice was scattered up and down the coast, and after the dust and sweat and glare and rumble of his long day he would come back to the sleepy village in the early evening, plunge for a freshening swim into the salt water, don his white clothes and saunter round to the quaint old house at the edge of the ocean. Here in the breezy kitchen he often sat for as long as an hour, talking with the Old Housekeeper, till the Sick-A-Bed Lady's tiny silver bell rang out with absurd peremptoriness. Then for as much time as seemed wise he went and sat with the Sick-A-Bed Lady.

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One night, one full-moon night, he came back from his day's work extraordinarily tired and fretted after a series of strident experiences, and hurried to the old house as to a veritable Haven of Refuge. The Housekeeper was busy with village company, so he postponed her report and went at once to the Sick-A-Bed Lady's room.

Only fools lit lights on such a night as that, and he threw himself down in the big chair by the bedside, and fairly basked in peacefulness and moonlight and content, while the Sick-A-Bed Lady leaned over and stroked his hair with her little white fingers, crooning some pleasant, childish thing about "nice, smoky Boy." There was no fret or fuss or even sound in the room, except the drowsy murmur of voices in the Garden, and the churky splash of little waves against the shore.

"Hear the French Verbs," said the Sick-A-Bed Lady, at last, with deliberate mischief. Then she shut her lips tight and waved her hands distractedly after a manner she had when she wished to imply that she was suddenly stricken dumb. The Young Doctor laughed and reached over and kissed her.

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"*J'aime*," he said.

"*J'aime*," the Sick-A-Bed Lady repeated.

"*Tu aimes*," he persisted.

"*Tu aimes*," she echoed on his lips.

—Then—"There'll be no '*he loves*' to our story," he cried suddenly, and caught her so fiercely to his breast that she gave a little quick gasp of pain and struggled back on her pillows, and the Young Doctor jumped up in bitter, stinging contrition and strode out of the room. Just across the threshold he met the Old Housekeeper with a clattering tray of dishes.

"I'm going down to the Library to smoke," he said huskily to her. "Come there when you've finished. I want to talk with you."

His thoughts of himself were not kind as he wandered into the library and settled down in the first big chair that struck his fancy.

Then he fell to wondering whether there was anything gross about his love, because it took no heed of mental qualifications. He thought of at least three houses in the village where that very night he would have found lights and laughter and clever talk, and the prodding sympathy of earnest women who made the sternest happening of the day seem nothing more than a dress rehearsal for the evening's narration of it. Then he thought again of the big, quiet room upstairs,

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with its unquestioning peace and love and restfulness and content. What was the best thing after all that a woman could bring to a man? Yet a year ago he had bragged of the blatant braininess of his best woman friend! He began to laugh at himself.

Slowly the incongruities of the whole situation bore in upon him, and he sat and smoked and smiled in moody silence, staring with skeptical interest at the dimly lighted room around him. It was certainly the Old Doctor's private study, and realization of just what that meant came over him ironically.

The Old Doctor had been very stingy with his house and his books and his knowledge and his patients. It was natural perhaps under the professional circumstances of waning Age and waxing Youth. Yet the fact remained. Never before in five years of village association had the Young Doctor crossed the threshold of the Old Doctor's home, yet now he came and went like the Man of the House. Here he sat at this instant in the Old Doctor's private study, in the Old Doctor's chair, his feet upon the Old Doctor's table, and the whole great room with its tier after tier of bookcases, and its drawer after drawer of probable memoranda *frée* before him. He could imagine the Old Doctor's impotent wrath over such a contingency, yet he felt no sentimental mawkishness over his own position. As far as he knew the Dead were dead. [20]

Sitting there in the Old Doctor's study, he conjured up scene after scene of the Old Doctor's irascibility and exclusiveness. Even as late as the Sick-A-Bed Lady's arrival, the Old Doctor had snubbed him unmercifully before a crowd of people. It was at the station when the little sick stranger was being taken off the car and put into a carriage, and the Old Doctor had hailed the Younger with unwonted friendliness.

"I've got a case in there that would make you famous if you could master it," he said.

The Young Doctor remembered perfectly how he had walked into the trap.

"What is it?" he had cried eagerly.

"That's none of your business," chuckled the Old Doctor, and drove away with all the platform loafers shouting with delight.

Well, it seemed to be the Young Doctor's business *now*, and he got up, turned the lamp higher and began to hunt through the Old Doctor's rarest books for some light on certain curious developments in the Sick-A-Bed Lady's case.

He was just in the midst of this hunt when the Old Housekeeper glided in like a ghost and startled him. [21]

"Sit down," he said absent-mindedly, and went on with his reading. He had almost forgotten her presence when she coughed and said: "Excuse me, sir, but I've something very special to say to you."

The Young Doctor looked up in surprise and saw that the Woman's face was ashy white.

"I—don't—think—you quite—understand the case," she stammered. "I think the little lady upstairs is going to be a Mother!"

The Young Doctor put his hand up to his face, and his face felt like parchment. He put his hand down to the book again, and the book cover quivered like flesh.

"What do you m-e-a-n?" he asked.

"I'll tell you what I mean," said the Old Housekeeper, and led him back to the sick room.

Two hours later the Young Doctor staggered into his Best Friend's house clutching a sheet of letter paper in his hand. His shoulders dragged as though under a pack, and every trace of boyishness was wrung like a rag out of his face.

"For Heaven's sake, what's the matter?" cried his friend, starting up.

"Nothing," muttered the Young Doctor, "except the Sick-A-Bed Lady."

"When did she die? What happened?" [22]

The Young Doctor made a gesture of dissent and crawled into a chair and began to fumble with the paper in his hand. Then he shivered and stared his Best Friend straight in the face.

"You might say," he stammered, "that I have just heard from the Sick-A-Bed Lady's Husband—he choked at the word, and his Friend sat up with astonishment: "You heard me *say* I had heard from the Sick-A-Bed Lady's Husband?" he persisted. "*You* heard me say it, mind you. You heard me say that her Husband is sick in Japan—detained indefinitely—so we are afraid he won't get here in time for her confinement—"

The sweat broke out in great drops on his forehead, and his hand that held the sheet of paper shook like a hand that has strained its muscles with heavy weights.

The Best Friend took a scathing glance at the scribbled words on the paper and laughed mirthlessly.

"You're a good fool," he said, "a good fool, and I'll publish your blessed lie to the whole stupid

village, if that's what you want."

But the Young Doctor sat oblivious with his head in his hands, muttering: "Blind fool, blind fool, how could I have been such a blind fool?"

"What is it to *you*?" asked his Best Friend abruptly.

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The Young Doctor jumped to his feet and squared his shoulders.

"It's *this* to me," he cried, "that I wanted her for my own! I could have cured her. I tell you I could have cured her. I wanted her for my own!"

"She's only a waif," said the Best Friend tersely.

"Waif?" cried the Young Doctor, "*waif*? No woman whom I love is a *waif*!" His face blazed furiously. "The woman I *love*—that little gentle girl—a *waif*?—without a home?—I would make a cool home for her out of Hell itself, if it was necessary! Damn, damn, *damn* the brute that deserted her, but *home is all around her* NOW! Do I think the Old Doctor guessed about it? *N-o!* Nobody could have guessed about it. Nobody could have known about it much before this. You say *again* she isn't *anybody's*? I'll prove to you as soon as it's decent that she's *mine*."

His Best Friend took him by the shoulder and shook him roughly.

"It is no time," he said, "for you to be courting a woman."

"I'll court my Sweetheart when and where I choose!" the Young Doctor answered defiantly, and left the house.

The night seemed a thousand miles long to him, but when he slept at last and woke again, the air was fresh and hopeful with a new day. He dressed quickly and hurried off to the scene of last night's tragedy, where he found the Old Housekeeper arguing in the doorway with a small boy. She turned to the Doctor complacently. "He's begging for the postage stamp off the Japanese letter," she exclaimed, "and I'm just telling him I sent it to my Sister's boy in Montreal."

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There was no slightest trace of self-consciousness in her manner, and the Young Doctor could not help but smile as he beckoned her into the house and shut the door.

Then, "Have you told her?" he asked eagerly.

The Old Housekeeper humped her shoulders against the door and folded her arms sumptuously. "No, I haven't told her," she said, "and I'm not going to. I don't dar'st! I help you out about your business same as I helped the Old Doctor out about his business. That's all right. That's as it should be. And I'll go skipping up those stairs to tell the little lady any highfaluting, pleasant yarn that you can invent, but I don't budge one single step to tell that poor, innocent, loony Lamb—the *truth*. It isn't ugliness, Doctor. I haven't got the strength, that's all!"

Just then the little silver bell tinkled, and the Doctor went heavily up the few steps that swung the Sick-A-Bed Lady's room just out of line of real upstairs or downstairs.

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The Sick-A-Bed Lady was lying in glorious state, arrayed in a wonderful pale green kimono with shimmering silver birds on it.

"You stayed too long downstairs," she asserted and went on trying to cut out pictures from a magazine.

The Young Doctor stood at the window looking out to sea as long as his legs would hold him, and then he came back and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"What's your name, Honey?" he asked with a forced smile.

"Why, 'Dear,' of course," she answered and dropped her scissors in surprise.

"What's my name?" he continued, fencing for time.

"Just '*Boy*,'" she said with sweet, contented positiveness.

The Young Doctor shivered and got up and started to leave the room, but at the threshold he stopped resolutely and came back and sat down again.

This time he took his Mother's wedding ring from his little finger and twirled it with apparent aimlessness in his hands.

Its glint caught the Sick-A-Bed Lady's eye, and she took it daintily in her fingers and examined it carefully. Then, as though it recalled some vague memory, she crinkled up her forehead and started to get out of bed. The Young Doctor watched her with agonized interest. She went direct to her bureau and began to search diligently through all the drawers, but when she reached the lower drawer and found some bright-colored ribbons she forgot her original quest, whatever it was, and brought all the ribbons back to bed with her.

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The Young Doctor started to leave her again, this time with a little gesture which she took to be anger, but he had not gone further than the head of the stairs before she called him back in a voice that was startlingly mature and reasonable.

"Oh, Boy, come back," she cried. "I'll be good. What do you want?"

The Young Doctor came doubtfully.

"Do you understand me to-day?" he asked in a voice that sent an ominous chill to her heart. "Can you think pretty clearly to-day?"

She nodded her head. "Yes," she answered; "it's a good day."

"Do you know what marriage is?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh, yes," she said, but her face clouded perceptibly.

Then he took her in his arms and told her plainly, brutally, clumsily, without preface, without comment: "Honey, you are going to have a child."

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For a second her mind wavered before him. He could actually see the totter in her eyes, and braced himself for the final hopeless crash, but suddenly all her being focused to the realization of his words, and she pushed at him with her hands and cried: "No—No—Oh, my God—*n-o!*" and fainted in his arms.

When she woke up again the little-girl look was all gone from her face, and though the Young Doctor smiled and smiled and smiled, he could not smile it back again. She just lay and watched him questioningly.

"Sweetheart," he whispered at last, "do you remember what I told you?"

"Yes," she answered gravely, "I remember that, but I don't remember what it means. Is it all right? Is it all right to *you?*"

"Yes," said the Young Doctor, "it's—all—right to—me."

Then the Sick-A-Bed Lady turned her little face wearily away on her pillow and went back to those dreams of hers which no one could fathom.

For all the dragging weeks and months that followed she lay in her bed or groped her way round her room in a sort of timid stupor. Whenever the Young Doctor was there she clung to him desperately and seemed to find her only comfort in his presence, but when she talked to him it was babbling talk of things and places he could not understand. All the village feared for the imminent tragedy in the great white house, and mourned the pathetic absence of the young husband, and the Young Doctor went his sorrowful way cursing that other "boy" who had wrought this final disaster on a girl's life.

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But when the Sick-A-Bed Lady's hour of trial came and some one held the merciful cone of ether to her face, the Sick-A-Bed Lady took one deep, heedless breath, then gave suddenly a great gasp, snatched the cone from her face, struggled up and stretched out her arms and cried, "Boy—Boy!"

The Young Doctor came running to her and saw that her eyes were big and startled and sharp with terror:

"Oh, Boy—*Boy,*" she cried, "the Ether!—I remember *everything* now—I—was his wife—the Old Doctor's Wife!"

The Young Doctor tried to replace the cone, but she beat at him furiously with her hands, crying:

"No, No, No!—If you give me Ether I shall die thinking of him!—Oh, no!—*n-o!*"

The Young Doctor's face was like chalk. His knees shook under him.

"My God!" he said, "what *can* I give you!"

The Sick-A-Bed Lady looked up at him and smiled a tortured, gallant smile. "Give me something to keep me here," she gasped! "Give me a token of you! Give me your little briarwood pipe to smell—and give it to me—quickly!"

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HICKORY DOCK

[33]

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HIS is the story of Hickory Dock, and of a Man and a Girl who trifled with Time.

Hickory Dock was a clock, and, of course, the Man, being a man, called it a clock, but the Girl, being a girl, called it a Hickory Dock for no more legitimate reason than that once upon a time

"Hickory, Dickory, Dock,
A Mouse ran up the Clock."

—Girls are funny things.

The Man and the Girl were very busy collecting a Home—in one room. They were just as poor as Art and Music could make them, but poverty does not matter much to lovers. The Man had collected the Girl, a wee diamond ring, a big Morris chair, two or three green and rose rugs, a shiny chafing-dish, and various incidentals. The Girl was no less discriminating. She had accumulated the Man, a Bagdad couch-cover, half-a-dozen pictures, a huge gilt mirror, three or four bits of fine china and silver, and a fair-sized boxful of lace and ruffles that idled under the couch until the Wedding-Day. The room was strikingly homelike, masculinely homelike, in all its features, but it was by no means home—yet. No place is home until *two* people have latch-keys. The Girl wore *her* key ostentatiously on a long, fine chain round her neck, but its mate hung high and dusty on a brass hook over the fireplace, and the sight of it teased the Man more than anything else that had ever happened to him in his life. The Girl was easily mistress of the situation, but the Man, you see, was not yet Master.

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It was tacitly understood that if the Wedding-Day *ever* arrived, the Girl should slip the extra key into her husband's hand the very first second that the Minister closed his eyes for the blessing. She would have chosen to do this openly in exchange for her ring, but the Man contended that it might not be legal to be married with a latch-key—some ministers are so particular. It was a joke, anyway—everything except the Wedding-Day itself. Meanwhile Hickory Dock kept track of the passing hours.

When the Man first brought Hickory Dock to the Girl, in a mysteriously pulsating tissue-paper package, the Girl pretended at once that she thought it was a dynamite bomb, and dropped it precipitously on the table and sought immediate refuge in the Man's arms, from which propitious haven she ventured forth at last and picked up the package gingerly, and rubbed her cheek against it—after the manner of girls with bombs. Then she began to tug at the string and tear at the paper.

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"Why, it's a Hickory Dock!" she exclaimed with delight,—“a real, live Hickory Dock!” and brandished the gift on high to the imminent peril of time and chance, and then fled back to the Man's arms with no excuse whatsoever. She was a bold little lover.

"But it's a *c-l-o-c-k*," remonstrated the Man with whimsical impatience. He had spent half his month's earnings on the gift. "Why can't you call it a clock? Why can't you *ever* call things by their right names?"

Then the Girl dimpled and blushed and burrowed her head in his shoulder, and whispered humbly, "Right name? Right names? Call things by their right names? Would you rather I called *you* by your right name—Mr. James Herbert Humphrey Jason?"

That settled the matter—settled it so hard that the Girl had to whisper the Man's wrong name seven times in his ear before he was satisfied. No man is practical about everything.

There are a good many things to do when you are in love, but the Girl did not mean that the *Art of Conversation* should be altogether lost, so she plunged for a topic.

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"I think it was beautiful of you to give me a Hickory Dock," she ventured at last.

The Man shifted a trifle uneasily and laughed. "I thought perhaps it would please you," he stammered. "You see, now I have given you *all my time*."

The Girl chuckled with amused delight. "Yes—all your time. And it's nice to have a Hickory Dock that says 'Till he comes! Till he comes! Till he comes!'"

"Till he comes to—*stay*," persisted the Man. There was no sparkle in his sentiment. He said things very plainly, but his words drove the Girl across the room to the window with her face flaming. He jumped and followed her, and caught her almost roughly by the shoulder and turned her round.

"Rosalie, Rosalie," he demanded, "will you love me till the *end of time*?" There was no gallantry in his face but a great, dogged persistency that frightened the Girl into a flippant answer. She brushed her fluff of hair across his face and struggled away from him.

"I will love you," she teased, "until—the clock stops."

Then the Man burst out laughing, suddenly and unexpectedly, like a boy, and romped her back again across the room, and snatched up the clock and stole away the key.

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"Hickory Dock shall *never* stop!" he cried triumphantly. "I will wind it till I die. And no one else must ever meddle with it."

"But suppose you forget?" the Girl suggested half wistfully.

"I shall *never* forget," said the Man. "I will wind Hickory Dock every week as long as I live. I *p-r-o-m-i-s-e!*" His lips shut almost defiantly.

"But it isn't fair," the Girl insisted. "It isn't fair for me to let you make such a long promise. You—might—stop—loving me." Her eyes filled quickly with tears. "Promise me just for one year,"—she stamped her foot,—“I won't take any other promise."

So, half provoked and half amused, the Man bound himself then and there for the paltry term of a year. But to fulfil his own sincerity and seriousness he took the clock and stopped it for a moment that he might start it up again with the Girl close in his arms. A half-frightened, half-

willing captive, she stood in her prison and looked with furtive eyes into the little, potential face of Hickory Dock.

"You—and I—for—*all time*," whispered the Man solemnly as he started the little mechanism throbbing once more on its way, and he stooped down to seal the pledge with a kiss, but once more the significance of his word and act startled the Girl, and she clutched at the clock and ran across the room with it, and set it down very hard on her desk beside the Man's picture. Then, half ashamed of her flight, she stooped down suddenly and patted the little, ticking surface of ebony and glass and silver.

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"It's a wonderful little Hickory Dock," she mused softly. "I never saw one just like it before."

The Man hesitated for a second and drew his mouth into a funny twist. "I don't believe there *is* another one like it in all the world," he acknowledged, half laughingly,—"*that is*, not *just* like it. I've had it fixed so that it won't strike *eleven*. I'm utterly tired of having you say 'There! it's eleven o'clock and you've *got* to go home.' *Now*, after ten o'clock nothing can strike till twelve, and that gives me two whole hours to use my own judgment in."

The Girl took one eager step towards him, when suddenly over the city roofs and across the square came the hateful, strident chime of midnight. Midnight? *Midnight?* The Girl rushed frantically to her closet and pulled the Man's coat out from among her fluffy dresses and thrust it into his hands, and he fled distractedly for his train without "Good-by."

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That was the trouble with having a lover who lived so far away and was so busy that he could come only one evening a week. Long as you could make that one evening, something always got crowded out. If you made love, there was no time to talk. If you talked, there was no time to make love. If you spent a great time in greetings, it curtailed your good-by. If you began your good-by any earlier, why, it cut your evening right in two. So the Girl sat and sulked a sad little while over the general misery of the situation, until at last, to comfort herself with the only means at hand, she went over to the closet and opened the door just wide enough to stick her nose in and sniff ecstatically.

"Oh! O—h!" she crooned. "O—h! What a nice, smoky smell."

Then she took Hickory Dock and went to bed. This method of bunking was nice for her, but it played sad havoc with Hickory Dock, who lay on his back and whizzed and whirred and spun around at such a rate that when morning came he was minutes and hours, not to say days, ahead of time.

This gain in time seemed rather an advantage to the Girl. She felt that it was a good omen and must in some manner hasten the Wedding-Day, but when she confided the same to the Man at his next visit he viewed the fact with righteous scorn, though the fancy itself pleased him mightily. The Girl learned that night, however, to eschew Hickory Dock as a rag doll. She did not learn this, though, through any particular solicitude for Hickory Dock, but rather because she had to stand by respectfully a whole precious hour and watch the Man's lean, clever fingers tinker with the little, jeweled mechanism. It was a fearful waste of time. "You are so kind to *little* things," she whispered at last, with a catch in her voice that made the Man drop his work suddenly and give all his attention to *big* things. And another evening went, while Hickory Dock stood up like a hero and refused to strike eleven.

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So every Sunday night throughout the Winter and the Spring and the Summer, the Man came joyously climbing up the long stairs to the Girl's room, and every Sunday night Hickory Dock was started off on a fresh round of Time and Love.

Hickory Dock, indeed, became a very precious object, for both Man and Girl had reached that particular stage of love where they craved the wonderful sensation of owning some vital thing together. But they were so busy loving that they did not recognize the instinct. The man looked upon Hickory Dock as an exceedingly blessed toy. The Girl grew gradually to cherish the little clock with a certain tender superstition and tingling reverence that sent her heart pounding every time the Man's fingers turned to any casual tinkering.

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And the Girl grew so exquisitely dear that the Man thought all women were like her. And the Man grew so sturdily precious that the Girl knew positively there was no person on earth to be compared with him. Over this happiness Hickory Dock presided throbbingly, and though he balked sometimes and bolted or lagged, he never stopped, and he never struck eleven.

Thus things went on in the customary way that things do go on with men and girls—until the Chronic Quarrel happened. The Chronic Quarrel was a trouble quite distinct from any ordinary lovers' disturbance, and it was a very silly little thing like this: The Girl had a nature that was emotionally apprehensive. She was always looking, as it were, for "dead men in the woods." She was always saying, "Suppose you get tired of me?" "Suppose I died?" "Suppose I found out that you had a wife living?" "Suppose you lost all your legs and arms in a railroad accident when you were coming here some Sunday night?"

And one day the Man had snapped her short with "Suppose? Suppose? What arrant nonsense! Suppose?—Suppose I fall in love with the Girl in the Office?"

It seemed to him the most extravagant supposition that he could possibly imagine, and he was perfectly delighted with its effect on his Sweetheart. She grew silent at once and very wistful.

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After that he met all her apprehensions with "Suppose?—Suppose I fall in love with the Girl in the Office!"

And one day the Girl looked up at him with hot tears in her eyes and said tersely, "Well, why don't you fall in love with her if you *want* to?"

That, of course, made a little trouble, but it was delicious fun making up, and the "Girl in the Office" became gradually one of those irresistibly dangerous jokes that always begin with laughter and end just as invariably with tears. When the Girl was sad or blue the Man was clumsy enough to try and cheer her with facetious allusions to the "Girl in the Office," and when the Girl was supremely, radiantly happy she used to boast, "Why, I'm so happy I don't care a *rap* about your old 'Girl in the Office.'" But whatever way the joke began, it always ended disastrously, with bitterness and tears, yet neither Man nor Girl could bear to formally taboo the subject lest it should look like the first shirking of their perfect intimacy and freedom of speech. The Man felt that in love like theirs he ought to be able to say anything he wanted to, so he kept on saying it, while the Girl claimed an equal if more caustic liberty of expression, and the Chronic Quarrel began to fester a little round its edges. [43]

One night in November, when Hickory Dock was nearly a year old in love, the Chronic Quarrel came to a climax. The Man was very listless that evening, and absent-minded, and altogether inadequate. The Girl accused him of indifference. He accused her in return of a shrewish temper. She suggested that perhaps he regretted his visit. He failed to contradict her. Then the Girl drew herself up to an absurd height for so small a creature and said stiffly,—

"You don't have to come next Sunday night if you don't want to."

At her scathing words the Man straightened up very suddenly in his chair and gazed over at the little clock in a startled sort of way.

"Why, of course I shall come," he retorted impulsively, "Hickory Dock needs me, if you don't."

"Oh, come and wind the clock by all means," flared the Girl. "I'm glad *something* needs you!"

Then the Man followed his own judgment and went home, though it was only ten o'clock.

"I'm not going to write to him this week," sobbed poor Rosalie. "I think he's very disagreeable."

But when the next Sunday came and the Man was *late*, it seemed as though an Eternity had been tacked onto a hundred years. It was fully quarter-past eight before he came climbing up the stairs. [44]

The Girl looked scornfully at the clock. Her throat ached like a bruise. "You didn't hurry yourself much, did you?" she asked spitefully.

The Man looked up quickly and bit his lip. "The train was late," he replied briefly. He did not stop to take off his coat, but walked over to the table and wound Hickory Dock. Then he hesitated the smallest possible fraction of a moment, but the Girl made no move, so he picked up his hat and started for the door.

The Girl's heart sank, but her pride rose proportionally. "Is that all you came for?" she flushed. "Good! I am very tired to-night."

Then the Man went away. She counted every footfall on the stairs. In the little hush at the street doorway she felt that he must surely turn and come running back again, breathless and eager, with outstretched arms and all the kisses she was starving for. But when she heard the front door slam with a vicious finality she went and threw herself, sobbing on the couch. "Fifty miles just to wind a clock!" she raged in grief and chagrin. "I'll punish him for it if that's all he comes for."

So the next Sunday night she took Hickory Dock with a cruel jerk, and put him on the floor just outside her door, and left a candle burning so that the Man could not possibly fail to see what was intended. "If all he comes for is to wind the clock, just because he *promised*, there's no earthly use of his coming in," she reasoned, and went into her room and shut and locked her door, waiting nervously with clutched hands for the footfall on the stairs. "He loves some one else! He loves some one else!" she kept prodding herself. [45]

Just at eight o'clock the Man came. She heard him very distinctly on the creaky board at the head of the stairs, and her heart beat to suffocation. Then she heard him come close to the door, as though he stooped down, and then he—laughed.

"Oh, very well," thought the Girl. "So he thinks it's funny, does he? He has no business to laugh while I am crying, even if he does love some one else.—I *hate him!*"

The Man knocked on the door very softly, and the Girl gripped tight hold of her chair for fear she should jump up and let him in. He knocked again, and she heard him give a strange little gasp of surprise. Then he tried the door-handle. It turned fatuously, but the door would not open. He pushed his weight against it,—she could almost feel the soft whirr of his coat on the wood,—but the door would not yield.—Then he turned very suddenly and went away. [46]

The Girl got up with a sort of gloating look, as though she liked her pain. "Next Sunday night is the last Sunday night of his year's promise," she brooded; "then everything will be over. He will see how wise I was not to let him promise forever and ever. I will send Hickory Dock to him by

express to save his coming for the final ceremony." Then she went out and got Hickory Dock and brought him in and shook him, but Hickory Dock continued to tick, "Till he comes! Till he comes! Till he comes!"

It was a very tedious week. It is perfectly absurd to measure a week by the fact that seven days make it—some days are longer than others. By Wednesday the Girl's proud little heart had capitulated utterly, and she decided not to send Hickory Dock away by express, but to let things take their natural course. And every time she thought of the "natural course" her heart began to pound with expectation. Of course, she would not acknowledge that she really expected the Man to come after her cruel treatment of him the previous week. "Everything is over. Everything is over," she kept preaching to herself with many gestures and illustrations; but next to God she put her faith in promises, and hadn't the Man promised a great, sacred lover's promise that he would come every Sunday for a year? So when the final Sunday actually came she went to her wedding-box and took out her "second best" of everything, silk and ruffles and laces, and dressed herself up for sheer pride and joy, with tingling thoughts of the night when she should wear her "first best" things. She put on a soft, little, white Summer dress that the Man liked better than anything else, and stuck a pink bow in her hair, and big rosettes on her slippers, and drew the big Morris chair towards the fire, and brought the Man's pipe and tobacco-box from behind the gilt mirror. Then she took Hickory Dock very tenderly and put him outside the door, with two pink candles flaming beside him, and a huge pink rose over his left ear. She thought the Man could smell the rose the second he opened the street door. Then she went back to her room, and left her door a wee crack open, and crouched down on the floor close to it, like a happy, wounded thing, and *waited*—

[47]

But the Man did not come. Eight o'clock, nine o'clock, ten o'clock, eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock, she waited, cramped and cold, hoping against hope, fearing against fear. Every creak on the stairs thrilled her. Every fresh disappointment chilled her right through to her heart. She sat and rocked herself in a huddled heap of pain, she taunted herself with lack of spirit, she goaded herself with intricate remorse—but she never left her bitter vigil until half-past two. Then some clatter of milkmen in the street roused her to the realization of a new day, and she got up dazed and icy, like one in a dream, and limped over to her couch and threw herself down to sleep like a drunken person.

[48]

Late the next morning she woke heavily with a vague, dull sense of loss which she could not immediately explain. She lay and looked with astonishment at the wrinkled folds of the white mull dress that bound her limbs like a shroud. She clutched at the tightness of her collar, and fingered with surprise the pink bow in her hair. Then slowly, one by one, the events of the previous night came back to her in all their significance, and with a muffled scream of heartbreak she buried her face in the pillow. She cried till her heart felt like a clenched fist within her, and then, with her passion exhausted, she got up like a little, cold, ruffled ghost and pattered out to the hall in her silk-stockinged feet, and picked up Hickory Dock with his wilted pink rose and brought him in and put him back on her desk. Then she brought in the mussy, pink-smooched candlesticks and stowed them far away in her closet behind everything else. The faintest possible scent of tobacco-smoke came to her from the closet depths, and as she reached instinctively to take a sad little whiff she became suddenly conscious that there was a strange, uncanny *hush* in the room, as though a soul had left its body. She turned back quickly and cried out with a smothered cry. Hickory Dock had stopped!

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"Until—the—end—of—Time," she gasped, and staggered hard against the closet-door. Then in a flash she burst out laughing stridently, and rushed for Hickory Dock and grabbed him by his little silver handle, opened the window with a bang, and threw him with all her might and main down into the brick alley four stories below, where he fell with a sickening crash among a wee handful of scattered rose petals.

—The days that followed were like horrid dreams, the nights, like hideous realities. The fire would not burn. The sun and moon would not shine, and life itself settled down like a pall. Every detail of that Sunday night stamped and re stamped itself upon her mind. Back of her outraged love was the crueller pain of her outraged faith. The Man of his own free will had made a sacred promise and broken it! She realized now for the first time in her life why men went to the devil because women had failed them—not disappointed them, but *failed* them! She could even imagine how poor mothers felt when fathers shirked their fatherhood. She tasted in one week's imagination all possible woman sorrows of the world.

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At the end of the second week she began to realize the depth of isolation into which her engagement had thrown her. For a year and a half she had thought nothing, dreamed nothing, cared for nothing except the Man. Now, with the Man swept away, there was no place to turn either for comfort or amusement.

At the end of the third week, when no word came, she began to gather together all the Man's little personal effects, and consigned them to a box out of sight—the pipe and tobacco, a favorite book, his soft Turkish slippers, his best gloves, and even a little poem which he had written for her to set to music. It was a pretty little love-song that they had made together, but as she hummed it over now for the last time she wondered if, after all, *woman's music* did not do more than man's words to make love Singable.

When a month was up she began to strip the room of everything that the Man had brought towards the making of their Home. It was like stripping tendons. She had never realized before how thoroughly the Man's personality had dominated her room as well as her life. When she had

crowded his books, his pictures, his college trophies, his Morris chair, his rugs, into one corner of her room and covered them with two big sheets, her little, paltry, feminine possessions looked like chiffon in a desert.

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While she was pondering what to do next her rent fell due. The month's idling had completely emptied her pewter savings-bank that she had been keeping as a sort of precious joke for the Honeymoon. The rent-bill startled her into spasmodic efforts at composition. She had been quite busy for a year writing songs for some Educational people, but how could one make harmony with a heart full of discord and all life off the key. A single week convinced her of the utter futility of these efforts. In one high-strung, wakeful night she decided all at once to give up the whole struggle and go back to her little country village, where at least she would find free food and shelter until she could get her grip again.

For three days she struggled heroically with burlap and packing-boxes. She felt as though every nail she pounded was hurting the Man as well as herself, and she pounded just as hard as she possibly could.

When the room was stripped of every atom of personality except her couch, and the duplicate latch-key, which still hung high and dusty, a deliciously cruel thought came to the Girl, and the irony of it set her eyes flashing. On the night before her intended departure she took the key and put it into a pretty little box and sent it to the Man.

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"He'll know by that token," she said, "that there's no more 'Home' for him and me. He will get his furniture a few days later, and then he will see that everything is scattered and shattered. Even if he's married by this time, the key will hurt him, for his wife will want to know what it means, and he never can tell her."

Then she cried so hard that her overwrought, half-starved little body collapsed, and she crept into her bed and was sick all night and all the next day, so that there was no possible thought or chance of packing or traveling. But towards the second evening she struggled up to get herself a taste of food and wine from her cupboard, and, wrapping herself in her pink kimono, huddled over the fire to try and find a little blaze and cheer.

Just as the flames commenced to flush her cheeks the lock clicked. She started up in alarm. The door opened abruptly, and the Man strode in with a very determined, husbandly look on his haggard face. For the fraction of a second he stood and looked at her pitifully frightened and disheveled little figure.

"Forgive me," he cried, "but I *had* to come like this." Then he took one mighty stride and caught her up in his arms and carried her back to her open bed and tucked her in like a child while she clung to his neck laughing and sobbing and crying as though her brain was turned. He smoothed her hair, he kissed her eyes, he rubbed his rough cheek confidently against her soft one, and finally, when her convulsive tremors quieted a little, he reached down into his great overcoat pocket and took out poor, battered, mutilated Hickory Dock.

[53]

"I found him down in the Janitor's office just now," he explained, and his mouth twitched just the merest trifle at the corners.

"Don't smile," said the Girl, sitting up suddenly very straight and stiff. "Don't smile till you know the whole truth. I broke Hickory Dock. I threw him *purposely* four stories down into the brick alley!"

The Man began to examine Hickory Dock very carefully.

"I should judge that it was a *brick* alley," he remarked with an odd twist of his lips, as he tossed the shattered little clock over to the burlap-covered armchair.

Then he took the Girl very quietly and tenderly in his arms again, and gazed down into her eyes with a look that was new to him.

"Rosalie," he whispered, "I will mend Hickory Dock for you if it takes a thousand years,"—his voice choked,—"but I wish to God I could mend my broken promise as easily!"

[54]

And Rosalie smiled through her tears and said,—

"Sweetheart-Man, you do love me?"

"With all my heart and soul and body and breath, and past and present and future I *love you!*" said the Man.

Then Rosalie kissed a little path to his ear, and whispered, oh, so softly,—

"Sweetheart-Man, I love *you* just that same way."

And Hickory Dock, the Angel, never ticked the passing of a single second, but lay on his back looking straight up to Heaven with his two little battered hands clasped eternally at Love's *high noon*.

[57]



None of those wet, warm, slushy February nights when the vapid air sags like sodden wool in your lungs, and your cheek-bones bore through your flesh, and your leaden feet seem strung directly from the roots of your eyes, three girls stamped their way through the jostling, peevish street crowds with no other object in Heaven or Earth except just to get—HOME.

It was supper time, too, somewhere between six and seven, the caved-in hour of the day when the ruddy ghost of Other People's dinners flaunts itself rather grossly in the pallid nostrils of Her Who Lives by the Chafing-Dish.

One of the girls was a Medical Masseuse, trained brain and brawn in the German Hospitals. One was a Public School Teacher with a tickle of chalk dust in her lungs. One was a Cartoon Artist with a heart like chiffon and a wit as accidentally malicious as the jab of a pin in a flirt's belt.

All three of them were silly with fatigue. The writhing city cavorted before them like a sick clown. A lame cab horse went strutting like a mechanical toy. Crape on a door would have plunged them into hysterics. Were you ever as tired as that?

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With no other object, except to get home

It was, in short, the kind of night that rips out every one according to his stitch. Rhoda Hanlan the Masseuse was ostentatiously sewed with double thread and backstitched at that. Even the little Teacher, Ruth MacLaurin, had a physique that was embroidered if not darned across its raveled places. But Noreen Gaudette, the Cartoon Drawer, with her spangled brain and her tissue-paper body, was merely basted together with a single silken thread. It was the knowledge of being only basted that gave Noreen the droll, puckered terror in her eyes whenever Life tugged at her with any specially inordinate strain.

Yet it was Noreen who was popularly supposed to be built with an electric battery instead of a heart.

The boarding-house that welcomed the three was rather tall for beauty, narrow-shouldered, flat-chested, hunched together in the block like a prudish, dour old spinster overcrowded in a street car. To call such a house "Home" was like calling such a spinster "Mother." But the three girls called it "Home" and rather liked the saucy taste of the word in their mouths.

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Across the threshold in a final spurt of energy the jaded girls pushed with the joyous realization that there were now only five flights of stairs between themselves and their own attic studio.

On the first floor the usual dreary vision greeted them of a hall table strewn with stale letters—most evidently bills, which no one seemed in a hurry to appropriate.

It was twenty-two stumbling, bundle-dropping steps to the next floor, where the strictly Bachelor Quarters with half-swung doors emitted a pleasant gritty sound of masculine voices, and a sumptuous cloud of cigarette smoke which led the way frowardly up twenty-two more toiling steps to the Old Maid's Floor, buffeted itself naughtily against the sternly shut doors, and then mounted triumphantly like sweet incense to the Romance Floor, where with door alluringly open the Much-Loved Girl and her Mother were frankly and ingenuously preparing for the Monday-Night-Lover's visit.

The vision of the Much-Loved Girl smote like a brutal flashlight upon the three girls in the hall.

Out of curl, out of breath, jaded of face, bedraggled of clothes, they stopped abruptly and stared into the vista.

Before their fretted eyes the room stretched fresh and clean as a newly returned laundry package. The green rugs lay like velvet grass across the floor. The chintz-covered furniture crisped like the crust of a cake. Facing the gilt-bound mirror, the Much-Loved Girl sat joyously in all her lingerie-waisted, lace-paper freshness, while her Mother hovered over her to give one last maternal touch to a particularly rampageous blond curl.

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The Much-Loved Girl was a cordial person. Her liquid, mirrored reflection nodded gaily out into the hall. There was no fatigue in the sparkling face. There was no rain or fog. There was no street-corner insult. There was no harried stress of wherewithal. There was just Youth, and Girl, and Cherishing.

She made the Masseuse and the little School Teacher think of a pale-pink rose in a cut-glass vase. But she made Noreen Gaudette *feel* like a vegetable in a boiled dinner.

With one despairing gasp—half-chuckle and half-sob—the three girls pulled themselves together and dashed up the last flight of stairs to the Trunk-Room Floor, and their own attic studio, where bumping through the darkness they turned a sulky stream of light upon a room more tired-looking than themselves, and then, with almost fierce abandon, collapsed into the nearest resting-places that they could reach.

It was a long time before any one spoke.

Between the treacherous breeze of the open window and a withering blast of furnace heat the wilted muslin curtain swayed back and forth with languid rhythm. Across the damp night air came faintly the yearning, lovery smell of violets, and the far-off, mournful whine of a sick hand-organ.

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On the black fur hearth-rug Rhoda, the red-haired, lay prostrated like a broken tiger lily with her long, lithe hands clutched desperately at her temples.

"I am so tired," she said. "I am so tired that I can actually feel my hair fade."

Ruth, the little Public School Teacher, laughed derisively from her pillowed couch where she struggled intermittently with her suffocating collar and the pinchy buckles on her overshoes.

"That's nothing," she asserted wanly. "I am so tired that I would like to build me a pink-wadded silk house, just the shape of a slipper, where I could snuggle down in the toe and go to sleep for a—million years. It isn't to-morrow's early morning that racks me, it's the thought of all the early mornings between now and the Judgment Day. Oh, any sentimental person can cry at night, but when you begin to cry in the morning—to lie awake and cry in the morning—" Her face sickened suddenly. "Did you see that Mother downstairs?" she gasped, "fixing that curl? Think of having a Mother!"

[62]

Then Noreen Gaudette opened her great gray eyes and grinned diabolically. She had a funny little manner of cartooning her emotions.

"Think of having a Mother?" she scoffed. "What nonsense!—*Think of having a c-u-r-l!*"

"You talk like Sunday-Paper débutantes," she drawled. "You don't know anything about being tired. Why, I am so tired—I am so tired—that I wish—I wish that the first man who ever proposed to me would come back and ask me—*again!*"

It was then that the Landlady, knocking at the door, presented a card, "Mr. Ernest T. Dextwood," for Miss Gaudette, and the innocent-looking conversation exploded suddenly like a short-fused firecracker.

Rhoda in an instant was sitting bolt upright with her arms around her knees rocking to and fro in convulsive delight. Ruth much more thoughtfully jumped for Noreen's bureau drawer. But Noreen herself, after one long, hyphenated "Oh, my *H-e-a-v-e-n-s!*" threw off her damp, wrinkled coat, stalked over to the open window, and knelt down quiveringly where she could smother her blazing face in the inconsequent darkness.

For miles and miles the teasing lights of Other Women's homes stretched out before her. From the window-sill below her rose the persistent purple smell of violets, and the cooing, gauzy laughter of the Much-Loved Girl. Fatigue was in the damp air, surely, but Spring was also there, and Lonesomeness, and worst of all, that desolating sense of patient, dying snow wasting away before one's eyes like Life itself.

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When Noreen turned again to her friends her eyelids drooped defiantly across her eyes. Her lips were like a scarlet petal under the bite of her teeth. There in the jetty black and scathing white of her dress she loomed up suddenly like one of her own best drawings—pulseless ink and stale white paper vitalized all in an instant by some miraculous emotional power. A living Cartoon of "*Fatigue*" she stood there—"Fatigue," as she herself would have drawn it—no flaccid failure of wilted bone and sagging flesh, but *Verve*—the taut Brain's pitiless rally of the Body that can not afford to rest—the verve of Factory Lights blazing overtime, the verve of the Runner who drops at his goal.

"All the time I am gone," she grinned, "pray over and over, 'Lead Noreen not into temptation.'" Her voice broke suddenly into wistful laughter: "Why to meet again a man who used to love you—it's like offering store-credit to a pauper."

Then she slammed the door behind her and started downstairs for the bleak, plush parlor, with a chaotic sense of absurdity and bravado.

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But when she reached the middle of the bachelor stairway and looked down casually and spied her clumsy arctics butting out from her wet-edged skirt all her nervousness focused instantly in her shaking knees, and she collapsed abruptly on the friendly dark stair and clutching hold of the banister, began to whimper.

In the midst of her stifled tears a door banged hard above her, the floor creaked under a sturdy step, and the tall, narrow form of the Political Economist silhouetted itself against the feeble light of the upper landing.

One step down he came into the darkness—two steps, three steps, four, until at last in choking miserable embarrassment, Noreen cried out hysterically:

"Don't step on me—I'm *crying!*"

With a gasp of astonishment the young man struck a sputtering match and bent down waving it before him.

"Why, it's *you*, Miss Gaudette," he exclaimed with relief. "What's the matter? Are you ill? What are you crying about?" and he dropped down beside her and commenced to fan her frantically with his hat.

"What *are* you crying about?" he persisted helplessly, drugged man-like, by the same embarrassment that mounted like wine to the woman's brain.

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Noreen began to laugh snuffingly.

"I'm not crying about anything special," she acknowledged. "I'm just crying. I'm crying partly because I'm tired—and partly because I've got my overshoes on—but *mostly*"—her voice began to catch again—"but mostly—because there's a *man* waiting to see me in the parlor."

The Political Economist shifted uneasily in his rain coat and stared into Noreen's eyes.

"Great Heavens!" he stammered. "Do you always cry when men come to see you? Is that why you never invited *me* to call?"

Noreen shook her head. "I never have men come to see me," she answered quite simply. "I go to see *them*. I study in their studios. I work on their newspapers. I caricature their enemies. Oh, it isn't *men* that I'm afraid of," she added blithely, "but *this* is something particular. *This* is something really very funny. Did you ever make a wish that something perfectly preposterous would happen?"

"Oh, yes," said the Political Economist reassuringly. "This very day I said that I wished my Stenographer would swallow the telephone."

"But she didn't swallow it, did she?" persisted Noreen triumphantly. "Now I said that I wished some one would swallow the telephone and she *did* swallow it!"

[66]

Then her face in the dusky light flared piteously with harlequined emotions. Her eyes blazed bright with toy excitement. Her lips curved impishly with exaggerated drollery. But when for a second her head drooped back against the banister her jaded small face looked for all the world like a death-mask of a Jester.

The Political Economist's heart crinkled uncomfortably within him.

"Why, you poor little girl," he said. "I didn't know that women got as tired as that. Let me take off your overshoes."

Noreen stood up like a well-trained pony and shed her clumsy footgear.

The Man's voice grew peremptory. "Your skirt is sopping wet. Are you crazy? Didn't have time to get into dry things? Nonsense! Have you had any supper? What? *N-o?* Wait a minute."

In an instant he was flying up the stairs, and when he came back there was a big glass of cool milk in his hand.

Noreen drank it ravenously, and then started downstairs with abrupt, quick courage.

When she reached the ground floor the Political Economist leaned over the banisters and shouted in a piercing whisper:

"I'll leave your overshoes outside my door where you can get them on your way up later."

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Then he laughed teasingly and added: "I—hope—you'll—have—a—good—time."

And Noreen, cleaving for one last second to the outer edge of the banisters, smiled up at him, so strainingly *up*, that her face, to the man above her, looked like a little flat white plate with a crimson-lipped rose wilting on it.

Then she disappeared into the parlor.

With equal abruptness the Political Economist changed his mind about going out, and went back instead to his own room and plunged himself down in his chair, and smoked and thought,

until his friend, the Poet at the big writing-desk, slapped down his manuscript and stared at him inquisitively.

"Lord Almighty! I wish I could draw!" said the Political Economist. It was not so much an exclamation as a reverent entreaty. His eyes narrowed sketchily across the vision that haunted him. "If I could draw," he persisted, "I'd make a picture that would hit the world like a knuckled fist straight between its selfish old eyes. And I'd call that picture 'Talent.' I'd make an ocean chopping white and squally, with *black* clouds scudding like fury across the sky, and no land in sight except rocks. And I'd fill that ocean full of sharks and things—not showing too much, you know, but just an occasional shimmer of fins through the foam. And I'd make a sailboat scooting along, tipped 'way over on her side toward you, with just a slip of an eager-faced girl in it. And I'd wedge her in there, wind-blown, spray-dashed, foot and back braced to the death, with the tiller in one hand and the sheet in the other, and weather-almighty roaring all around her. And I'd make the riskiest little leak in the bottom of that boat rammed desperately with a box of chocolates, and a bunch of violets, and a large paper compliment in a man's handwriting reading: 'Oh, how *clever* you are.' And I'd have that girl's face haggard with hunger, starved for sleep, tense with fear, ravished with excitement. But I'd have her chin *up*, and her eyes *open*, and the tiniest tilt of a quizzical smile hounding you like mad across the snug, gilt frame. Maybe, too, I'd have a woman's magazine blowing around telling in chaste language how to keep the hair 'smooth' and the hands 'velvety,' and admonishing girls above all things not to be eaten by sharks! Good Heavens, Man!" he finished disjointedly, "a girl doesn't know how to sail a boat anyway!"

[68]

"*W-h-a-t* are you talking about?" moaned the Poet.

The Political Economist began to knock the ashes furiously out of his pipe.

"What am I talking about?" he cried; "I'm talking about *girls*. I've always said that I'd gladly fall in love if I only could decide what kind of a girl I wanted to fall in love with. Well, I've decided!"

[69]

The Poet's face furrowed. "Is it the Much-Loved Girl?" he stammered.

The Political Economist's smoldering temper began to blaze.

"No, it isn't," ejaculated the Political Economist. "The Much-Loved Girl is a sweet enough, airy, fairy sort of girl, but I'm not going to fall in love with just a pretty valentine."

"Going to try a 'Comic'?" the Poet suggested pleasantly.

The Political Economist ignored the impertinence. "I am reasonably well off," he continued meditatively, "and I'm reasonably good-looking, and I've contributed eleven articles on 'Men and Women' to modern economic literature, but it's dawned on me all of a sudden that in spite of all my beauteous theories regarding life in general, I am just one big shirk when it comes to life in particular."

The Poet put down his pen and pushed aside his bottle of rhyming fluid, and began to take notice.

"Whom are you going to fall in love with?" he demanded.

The Political Economist sank back into his chair.

"I don't quite know," he added simply, "but she's going to be some tired girl. Whatever else she may or may not be, she's got to be a tired girl."

[70]

"A tired girl?" scoffed the Poet. "That's no kind of a girl to marry. Choose somebody who's all pink and white freshness. That's the kind of a girl to make a man happy."

The Political Economist smiled a bit viciously behind his cigar.

"Half an hour ago," he affirmed, "I was a beast just like you. Good Heavens! Man," he cried out suddenly, "did you ever see a girl cry? Really cry, I mean. Not because her manicure scissors jabbed her thumb, but because her great, strong, tyrant, sexless brain had goaded her poor little woman-body to the very cruelest, last vestige of its strength and spirit. Did you ever see a girl like that Miss Gaudette upstairs—she's the Artist, you know, who did those cartoons last year that played the devil itself with 'Congress Assembled'—did you ever see a girl like *that* just plain thrown down, tripped in her tracks, sobbing like a hurt, tired child? Your pink and white prettiness can cry like a rampant tragedy-queen all she wants to over a misfitted collar, but my hand is going here and now to the big-brained girl who cries like a child!"

"In short," interrupted the Poet, "you are going to help—Miss Gaudette sail her boat?"

[71]

"Y-e-s," said the Political Economist.

"And so," mocked the Poet, "you are going to jump aboard and steer the young lady adroitly to some port of your own choosing?"

The older man's jaws tightened ominously. "No, by the Lord Almighty, that's just what I am not going to do!" he promised. "I'm going to help her sail to the port of her own choosing!"

The Poet began to rummage in his mind for adequate arguments. "Oh, allegorically," he conceded, "your scheme is utterly charming, but from any material, matrimonial point of view I

should want to remind myself pretty hard that overwrought brains do not focus very easily on domestic interests, nor do arms which have tugged as you say at 'sheets' and 'tillers' curve very dimplingly around youngsters' shoulders."

The Political Economist blew seven mighty smoke-puffs from his pipe.

"That would be the economic price I deserve to pay for not having arrived earlier on the scene," he said quietly.

The Poet began to chuckle. "You certainly are hard hit," he scoffed.

"Political Economy
Gone to rhyme with Hominy!

It's an exquisite scheme!"

"It's a rotten rhyme," attested the Political Economist, and strode over to the mantelpiece, where he began to hunt for a long piece of twine. [72]

"Miss Gaudette," he continued, "is downstairs in the parlor now entertaining a caller—some resurrected beau, I believe. Anyway, she left her overshoes outside my door to get when she comes up again, and I'm going to tie one end of this string to them and the other end to my wrist, so that when she picks up her shoes a few hours later it will wake me from my nap, and I can make one grand rush for the hall and—"

"Propose then and there?" quizzed the Poet.

"No, not exactly. But I'm going to ask her if she'll let me fall in love with her."

The Poet sniffed palpably and left the room.

But the Political Economist lay back in his chair and went to sleep with a great, pleasant expectancy in his heart.

When he woke at last with a sharp, tugging pain at his wrist the room was utterly dark, and the little French clock had stopped aghast and clasped its hands at eleven.

For a second he rubbed his eyes in perplexity. Then he jumped to his feet, fumbled across the room and opened the door to find Noreen staring with astonishment at the tied overshoes. [73]

"Oh, I wanted to speak to you," he began. Then his eyes focused in amazement on a perfectly huge bunch of violets which Noreen was clasping desperately in her arms.

"Good Heavens!" he cried. "Is anybody dead?"

But Noreen held the violets up like a bulwark and commenced to laugh across them.

"He did propose," she said, "and I accepted him! Does it look as though I had chosen to be engaged with violets instead of a ring?" she suggested blithely. "It's only that I asked him if he would be apt to send me violets, and when he said: 'Yes, every week,' I just asked if I please couldn't have them all at once. There must be a Billion dollars' worth here. I'm going to have a tea-party to-morrow and invite the Much-Loved Girl." The conscious, childish malice of her words twisted her lips into an elfish smile. "It's Mr. Ernest Dextwood," she rattled on: "Ernest Dextwood, the Coffee Merchant. He's a widower now—with three children. Do—you—think—that—I—will—make—a—good—stepmother?"

The violets began to quiver against her breast, but her chin went higher in rank defiance of the perplexing *something* which she saw in the Political Economist's narrowing eyes. She began to quote with playful recklessness Byron's pert parody: [74]

"There is a tide in the affairs of women
Which taken at its flood leads—God Knows Where."

But when the Political Economist did not answer her, but only stared with brooding, troubled eyes, she caught her breath with a sudden terrifying illumination. "Ouch!" she said. "O-u-c-h!" and wilted instantly like a frost-bitten rose under heat. All the bravado, all the stamina, all the glint of her, vanished utterly.

"Mr. Political Economist," she stammered, "Life—is—too—hard—for—me. I am not Rhoda Hanlan with her sturdy German peasant stock. I am not Ruth MacLaurin with her Scotch-plaited New Englandism. Nationality doesn't count with me. My Father was a Violinist. My Mother was an Actress. In order to marry, my Father swapped his music for discordant factory noises, and my Mother shirked a dozen successful rôles to give one life-long, very poor imitation of Happiness. My Father died of too much to drink. My Mother died of too little to eat. And I was bred, I guess, of very bitter love, of conscious sacrifice—of thwarted genius—of defeated vanity. Life—is—too—hard—for—me—*alone*. I can not finance it. I can not safeguard it. I can not weather it. *I am not seaworthy!* You might be willing to risk your *own* self-consciousness, but when the dead begin to come back and clamor in you—when you laugh unexpectedly with your Father's restive voice—when you quicken unexplainably to the Lure of guilt and tinsel—" A whimper of pain went scudding across her face, and she put back her head and grinned—"You can keep my overshoes for a souvenir," she finished abruptly. "I'm not allowed any more to go out when it storms!" Then she turned like a flash and ran swiftly up the stairs. [75]

When he heard the door slam hard behind her, the Political Economist fumbled his way back through the darkened room to his Morris chair, and threw himself down again. Ernest Dextwood? He knew him well, a prosperous, kindly, yet domestically tyrannical man, bright in the office, stupid at home. Ernest Dextwood! So much less of a girl would have done for him.

A widower with three children? The eager, unspent emotionalism of Noreen's face flaunted itself across his smoky vision. All that hunger for Life, for Love, for Beauty, for Sympathy, to be blunted once for all in a stale, misfitting, ready-made home? A widower with three children! God in Heaven, was she as tired as that!

It was a whole long week before he saw Noreen again. When he met her at last she had just come in from automobiling, all rosy-faced and out of breath, with her thin little face peering almost plumply from its heavy swathings of light-blue veiling, and her slender figure deeply wrapped in a wondrous covert coat. [76]

Rhoda Hanlan and Ruth MacLaurin were close behind her, much more prosaically garnished in golf capes and brown-colored mufflers. The Political Economist stood by on the stairs to let them pass, and Noreen looked back at him and called out gaily:

"It's lots of fun to be engaged. We're all enjoying it very much. It's bully!"

The next time he saw her she was on her way downstairs to the parlor, in a long-tailed, soft, black evening gown that bothered her a bit about managing. Her dark hair was piled up high on her head, and she had the same mischievous, amateur-theatrical charm that the blue chiffon veil and covert coat had given her.

Quite frankly she demanded the Political Economist's appreciation of her appearance.

"Just see how nice I can look when I really try?" she challenged him, "but it took me all day to do it, and my work went to smash—and my dress cost seventy dollars," she finished wryly.

But the Political Economist was surly about his compliment.

"No, I like you better in your little business suit," he attested gruffly. And he lied, and he knew that he lied, for never before had he seen the shrewd piquancy of her eyes so utterly swamped by just the wild, sweet lure of girlhood. [77]

Some time in May, however, when the shop windows were gay with women's luxuries, he caught a hurried glimpse of her face gazing rather tragically at a splurge of lilac-trimmed hats.

Later in the month he passed her in the Park, cuddled up on a bench, with her shabby business suit scrunched tight around her, her elbows on her knees, her chin burrowed in her hands, and her fiercely narrowed eyes quaffing like some outlawed thing at the lusty new green grass, the splashing fountain, the pinky flush of flowering quince. But when he stopped to speak to her she jumped up quickly and pleaded the haste of an errand.

It was two weeks later in scorching June that the biggest warehouses on the river caught fire in the early part of the evening. The day had been as harsh as a shining, splintery plank. The night was like a gray silk pillow. In blissful, soothing consciousness of perfect comfort every one in the boarding-house climbed up on the roof to watch the gorgeous, fearful conflagration across the city. The Landlady's voice piped high and shrill discussing the value of insurance. The Old Maids scuttled together under their knitted shawls. The Much-Loved Girl sat amiably enthroned among the bachelors with one man's coat across her shoulders, another man's cap on her yellow head, and two deliciously timid hands clutched at the coat-sleeves of the two men nearest her. Whenever she bent her head she trailed the fluff of her hair across the enraptured eyelids of the Poet. [78]

Only Noreen Gaudette was missing.

"Where is Miss Gaudette?" probed the Political Economist.

The Masseur answered vehemently: "Why, Noreen's getting ready to go to the fire. Her paper sent for her just as we came up. There's an awful row on, you know, about the inefficiency of the Fire Department, and there's no other person in all the city who can make people look as silly as Noreen can. If this thing appeals to her to-night, and she gets good and mad enough, and keeps her nerve, there'll be the biggest overhauling of the Fire Department that *you* ever saw! But I'm sorry it happened. It will be an all-night job, and Noreen is almost dead enough as it is."

"An 'all-night job'?" The Much-Loved Girl gasped out her startled sense of propriety, and snuggled back against the shoulder of the man who sat nearest to her. She was very genuinely sorry for any one who had to be improper.

The Political Economist, noting the incident in its entirety, turned abruptly on his heel, climbed down the tremulous ladder to the trunk-room floor and knocked peremptorily at Noreen's door. [79]

In reply to the answer which he thought he heard, he turned the handle of the door and entered. The gas jet sizzled blatantly across the room, and a tiny blue flame toiled laboriously in a cooking lamp beneath a pot of water. The room was reeking strong with the smell of coffee, the rank brew that wafted him back in nervous terror to his college days and the ghastly eve of his final examinations. A coat, a hat, a mouse-gray sweater, a sketch-book, and a bunch of pencils were thrown together on the edge of the divan. Crouched on the floor with head and shoulders

prostrate across her easel chair and thin hands straining at the woodwork was Noreen Gaudette. The startled face that lifted to his was haggard with the energy of a year rallied to the needs of an hour.

"I thought you told me to come in," said the Political Economist. "I came down to go to the fire with you."

Noreen was on her feet in an instant, hurrying into her hat and coat, and quaffing greedily at the reeking coffee.

"You ought to have some one to look after you," persisted the man. "Where's Mr. Dextwood?"

Noreen stood still in the middle of the floor and stared at him.

[80]

"Why, I've broken my engagement," she exclaimed, trying hard to speak tamely and reserve every possible fraction of her artificial energy.

"Oh, yes," she smiled wanly, "I couldn't afford to be engaged! I couldn't afford the time. I couldn't afford the money. I couldn't afford the mental distraction. I'm working again now, but it's horribly hard to get back into the mood. My drawing has all gone to smash. But I'll get the hang of it again pretty soon."

"You look in mighty poor shape to work to-night," said the Political Economist. "What makes you go?"

"What makes me go?" cried Noreen, with an extravagant burst of vehemence. "What makes me go?—Why, if I make good to-night on those Fire-Department Pictures I get a Hundred Dollars, as well as the assurance of all the Republican cartooning for the next city election. It's worth a lot of money to me!"

"Enough to kill yourself for?" probed the Man.

Noreen's mouth began to twist. "Yes—if you still owe for your automobile coat, and your black evening gown, and your room rent and a few other trifles of that sort. But come on, if you'll promise not to talk to me till it's all over." Like a pair of youngsters they scurried down the stairs, jumped into the waiting cab, and galloped off toward the river edge of the city.

[81]

True to his promise, the Political Economist did not speak to her, but he certainly had not promised to keep his eyes shut as well as his mouth. From the very first she sat far forward on the seat where the passing street-lights blazed upon her unconscious face. The Man, the cab, love-making, debt-paying, all were forgotten in her desperate effort to keep keyed up to the working-point. Her brain was hurriedly sketching in her backgrounds. Her suddenly narrowed eyes foretold the tingling pride in some particular imagining. The flashing twist of her smile predicted the touch of malice that was to make her pictures the sensation of—a day.

The finish of the three-mile drive found her jubilant, prescient, pulsing with power. The glow from the flames lit up the cab like a room. The engine bells clanged around them. Sparks glittered. Steam hissed. When the cabman's horse refused to scorch his nose any nearer the conflagration, Noreen turned to the Political Economist with some embarrassment. "If you really want to help me," she pleaded, "you'll stay here in the cab and wait for me."

Then, before the Political Economist could offer his angry protest, she had opened the door, jumped from the step, and disappeared into the surging, rowdy throng of spectators. A tedious hour later the cab door opened abruptly, and Noreen reappeared.

[82]

Her hat was slouched down over her heat-scorched eyes. Her shoulders were limp. Her face was dull, dumb, gray, like a Japanese lantern robbed of its candle. Bluntly she thrust her sketch-book into his hands and threw herself down on the seat beside him.

"Oh, take me home," she begged. "Oh, take me home *quick*. It's no use," she added with a shrug, "I've seen the whole performance. I've been everywhere—inside the ropes—up on the roofs—out on the waterfront. The Fire Department Men are not 'inefficient.' They're simply *bully!* *And I make no caricatures of heroes!*"

The lurch of the cab wheel against a curbstone jerked a faint smile into her face. "Isn't it horrid," she complained, "to have a Talent and a Living that depend altogether upon your *getting mad?*" Then her eyes flooded with worry. "What *shall* I do?"

"You'll marry me," said the Political Economist.

"Oh, no!" gasped Noreen. "I shall never, never marry any one! I told you that I couldn't afford to be engaged. It takes too much time, and besides," her color flamed piteously, "I didn't like being engaged."

[83]

"I didn't ask you to be engaged," persisted the Political Economist. "I didn't ask you to serve any underpaid, ill-fed, half-hearted apprenticeship to Happiness. I asked you to be married."

"Oh, no!" sighed Noreen. "I shall never marry any one."

The Political Economist began to laugh. "Going to be an old maid?" he teased.

The high lights flamed into Noreen's eyes. She braced herself into the corner of the carriage and fairly hurled her defiance at him. Indomitable purpose raged in her heart, unutterable pathos

drooped around her lips. Every atom of blood in her body was working instantly in her brain. No single drop of it loafed in her cheeks under the flimsy guise of embarrassment.

"I am not an 'Old Maid!' I am not! No one who creates anything is an 'Old Maid!'"

The passion of her mood broke suddenly into wilful laughter. She shook her head at him threateningly.

"Don't you ever dare to call me an 'Old Maid' again.—But I'll tell you just what you can call me—Women are supposed to be the Poetry of Life, aren't they—the Sonnet, the Lyric, the Limerick? Well—I am blank verse. *That* is the trouble with me. I simply *do not rhyme*.—That is all!"

[84]

"Will you marry me?" persisted the Political Economist.

Noreen shook her head. "No!" she repeated. "You don't seem to understand. Marriage is not for me. I tell you that I am Blank Verse. I am *Talent*, and I do not *rhyme* with Love. I am *Talent* and I do not rhyme with *Man*. There is no place in my life for you. You can not come into my verse and rhyme with me!"

"Aren't you a little bit exclusive?" goaded the Political Economist.

Noreen nodded gravely. "Yes," she said, "I am brutally exclusive. But everybody isn't. Life is so easy for some women. Now, the Much-Loved Girl is nothing in the world except 'Miss.' She rhymes inevitably with almost anybody's kiss.—*I* am not just 'Miss.' The Much-Loved Girl is nothing in the world except 'Girl.'—She rhymes inevitably with 'Curl.' *I* am not just 'Girl.' She is 'Coy' and rhymes with 'Boy.' She is 'Simple' and rhymes with 'Dimple.' *I am none of those things!* I haven't the Lure of the Sonnet. I haven't the Charm of the Lyric. I haven't the Bait of the Limerick. At the very best I am 'Brain' and rhyme with 'Pain.' And I wish I was *dead!*"

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The Political Economist's heart was pounding like a gong smothered in velvet. But he stooped over very quietly and pushed the floor cushion under her feet and snuggled the mouse-gray sweater into a pillowed roll behind her aching neck. Then from his own remotest corner he reached out casually and rallied her limp, cold hand into the firm, warm clasp of his vibrant fingers.

"Of course, you never have rhymed," he said. "How could you possibly have rhymed when—*I am the missing lines of your verse?*" His clasp tightened. "Never mind about Poetry to-night, Dear, but *to-morrow* we'll take your little incomplete lonesome verse and quicken it into a Love-Song that will make the Oldest Angel in Heaven sit up and carol!"

THE HAPPY-DAY

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I was not you, yourself, who invented your Happy-day. It was your Father, long ago in little-lad time, when a Happy-Day or a Wooden Soldier or High Heaven itself lay equally tame and giftable in the cuddling, curving hollow of a Father's hand.

Your Father must have been a very great Genius. How else could he have invented any happy thing in the black-oak library?

The black-oak library was a cross-looking room, dingy, lowering, and altogether boggy. You could not stamp your boot across the threshold without joggling the heart-beats out of the gaunt old clock that loomed in the darkermost corner of the alcove. You could not tiptoe to the candy box without plunging headlong into a stratum of creakiness that puckered your spine as though an electric devil were pulling the very last basting thread out of your little soul. Oh, it must have been a very, very aged room. The darkness was abhorrent to you. The dampness reeked with the stale, sad breath of ancient storms. Worst of all, blood-red curtains clotted at the windows; rusty swords and daggers hung most imminently from the walls, and along the smutted hearth a huge, moth-eaten tiger skin humped up its head in really terrible ferocity.

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Through all the room there was no lively spot except the fireplace itself.

Usually, white birch logs flamed on the hearth with pleasant, crackling cheerfulness, but on this special day you noted with alarm that between the gleaming andirons a soft, red-leather book writhed and bubbled with little gray wisps of pain, while out of a charry, smoochy mass of nothingness a blue-flowered muslin sleeve stretched pleadingly toward you for an instant, shuddered, blazed, and was—gone.

It was there that your Father caught you, with that funny, strange sniff of havoc in your nostrils.

It was there that your Father told you his news.

When you are only a little, little boy and your Father snatches you suddenly up in his arms and tells you that he is going to be married again, it is very astonishing. You had always supposed

that your Father was perfectly married! In the dazzling sunshine of the village church was there not a thrilly blue window that said quite distinctly, "Clarice Val Dere" (that was your Mother) "Lived" (*Lived*, it said!) "June, 1860—December, 1880"? All the other windows said "Died" on them. Why should your Father marry again?

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In your Dear Father's arms you gasped, "Going to be *married?*" and your two eyes must have popped right out of your head, for your Father stooped down very suddenly and kissed them hard—whack, whack, back into place.

"N—o, not going to be married," he corrected, "but going to be married—again."

He spoke as though there were a great difference; but it was man-talk and you did not understand it.

Then he gathered you into the big, dark chair and pushed you way out on his knees and scrunched your cheeks in his hands and ate your face all up with his big eyes. When he spoke at last, his voice was way down deep like a bass drum.

"Little Boy Jack," he said, "you must never, never, never forget your Dear Mother!"

His words and the bir-r-r of them shook you like a leaf.

"But what was my Dear Mother like?" you whimpered. You had never seen your Mother.

Then your Father jumped up and walked hard on the creaky floor. When he turned round again, his eyes were all wet and shiny like a brown stained-glass window.

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"What was your Dear Mother like?" he repeated. "Your Dear Mother was like—was like—the flash of a white wing across a stormy sea. And your Dear Mother's name was 'Clarice.' I give it to you for a Memorial. What better Memorial could a little boy have than his Dear Mother's name? And there is a date—" His voice grew suddenly harsh and hard like iron, and his lips puckered on his words as with a taste of rust—"there is a date—the 26th of April—No, that is too hard a date for a little boy's memory! It was a Thursday. I give you Thursday for your—Happy-Day. 'Clarice' for a Memorial, and Thursday for your Happy-Day." His words began to beat on you like blows. "As—long—as—you—live," he cried, "be very kind to any one who is named 'Clarice.' And no matter what Time brings you—weeks, months, years, centuries—*keep Thursday for your Happy-Day*. No cruelty must ever defame it, no malice, no gross bitterness."

Then he crushed you close to him for the millionth, billionth fraction of a second, and went away, while you stayed behind in the scary black-oak library, feeling as big and achy and responsible as you used to feel when you and your Dear Father were carrying a heavy suit-case together and your Dear Father let go his share just a moment to light his brown cigar. It gave you a beautiful feeling in your head, but way off in your stomach it tugged some.

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So you crept away to bed at last, and dreamed that on a shining path leading straight from your front door to Heaven you had to carry all alone two perfectly huge suit-cases packed tight with love, and one of the suit-cases was marked "Clarice" and one was marked "Thursday." Tug, tug, tug, you went, and stumble, stumble, stumble, but your Dear Father could not help you at all because he was perfectly busy carrying a fat leather bag, some golf sticks, and a bull-terrier for a strange lady.

It was not a pleasant dream, and you screamed out so loud in the night that the Housekeeper-Woman had to come and comfort you. It was the Housekeeper-Woman who told you that on the morrow your Father was going far off across the salt seas. It was the Housekeeper-Woman who told you that you, yourself, were to be given away to a Grandmother-Lady in Massachusetts. It was also the Housekeeper-Woman who told you that your puppy dog Bruno—Bruno the big, the black, the curly, the waggy, was not to be included in the family gift to the Grandmother-Lady. Everybody reasoned, it seemed, that you would not need Bruno because there would be so many other dogs in Massachusetts. That was just the trouble. They *would* all be "other dogs." It was Bruno that you wanted, for he was the only *dog*, just as *you* were the only *boy* in the world. All the rest were only "other boys." You could have explained the matter perfectly to your Father if the Housekeeper-Woman had not made you cry so that you broke your explainer. But later in the night the most beautiful thought came to you. At first perhaps it tasted a little bit sly in your mouth, but after a second it spread like ginger, warm and sweet over your whole body except your toes, and you crept out of bed like a flannel ghost and fumbled your way down the black hall to your Dear Father's room and woke him shamelessly from his sleep. His eyes in the moonlight gleamed like two frightened dreams.

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"Dear Father," you cried—you could hardly get the words fast enough out of your mouth—"Dear—Father—I—do—not—think—Bruno—is—a—very—good—name—for—a—big—black—dog—I—am—going—to—name—him—Clarice—instead!"

That was how you and Bruno-Clarice happened to celebrate together your first Happy-Day with a long, magic, joggling train journey to Massachusetts—the only original *boy* and the only original *dog* in all the world.

The Grandmother-Lady proved to be a very pleasant purple sort of person. Exactly whose Grandmother she was, you never found out. She was not your Father's mother. She was not your Mother's mother. With these links missing, whose Grandmother could she be? You could hardly press the matter further without subjecting her to the possible mortification of confessing that

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she was only adopted. Maybe, crudest of all, she was just a Paid-Grandmother.

The Grandmother-Lady lived in a perfectly brown house in a perfectly green garden on the edge of a perfectly blue ocean. That was the Sight of it. Salted mignonette was the Smell of it. And a fresh wind flapping through tall poplar trees was always and forever the Sound of it.

The brown house itself was the living image of a prim, old-fashioned bureau backed up bleakly to the street, with its piazza side yanked out boldly into the garden like a riotous bureau drawer, through which the Rising Sun rummaged every morning for some particular new shade of scarlet or yellow nasturtiums. As though quite shocked by such bizarre untidiness, the green garden ran tattling like mad down to the ocean and was most frantically shooed back again, so that its little trees and shrubs and flowers fluttered in a perpetual nervous panic of not knowing which way to blow.

But the blue ocean was the most wonderful thing of all. Never was there such an ocean! Right from the far-away edge of the sky it came, roaring, ranting, rumpling, till it broke against the beach all white and frilly like the Grandmother-Lady's best ruching. It was morning when you saw the ocean first, and its pleasant waters gleamed like a gorgeous, bright-blue looking-glass covered with paper ships all filled with Other Boys' fathers. It was not till the first night came down—black and mournful and moany—it was not till the first night came down that you saw that the ocean was Much Too Large. There in your chill linen bed, with the fear of Sea and Night and Strangers upon you, you discovered a very strange droll thing—that your Father was a Person and might therefore leave you, but that your Mother was a *feeling* and would never, never, never forsake you. Bruno-Clarice, slapping his fat, black tail against your bedroom floor, was something of a *feeling* too.



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The blue ocean was the most wonderful thing of all

Most fortunately for your well-being, the Grandmother-Lady's house was not too isolated from its neighbors. To be sure, a tall, stiff hedge separated the green garden from the lavender-and-pink garden next door, but a great scraggly hole in the hedge gave a beautiful prickly zest to friendly communication.

More than this, two children lived on the other side of the hedge. You had never had any playmates before in all your life!

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One of the children was just Another Boy—a duplicate of you. But the other one was—*the only original girl*. Next to the big ocean, she was the surprise of your life. She wore skirts instead of clothes. She wore curls instead of hair. She wore stockings instead of legs. She cried when you laughed. She laughed when you cried. She was funny from the very first second, even when the Boy asked you if your big dog would bite. The Boy stood off and kept right on asking: "Will he bite? Will he bite? *W-i-l-l* he *bite?*" But the Girl took a great rough stick and pried open Bruno-Clarice's tusky mouth *to see if he would*, and when he *g-r-o-w-l-e-d*, she just kissed him smack on his black nose and called him "A Precious," and said, "Why, of course he'll bite."

The Boy was ten years old—a year older, and much fatter than you. His name was Sam. The Girl was only eight years old, and you could not tell at first whether she was thin or fat, she was so ruffledy. She had a horrid dressy name, "Sophia." But everybody called her Ladykin.

Oh, it is fun to make a boat that will flop sideways through the waves. It is fun to make a windmill that will whirl and whirl in the grass. It is fun to make an education. It is fun to make a fortune. But most of anything in the world it is fun to make a *friend!*

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You had never made a *friend* before. First of all you asked, "How old are you?" "Can you do fractions?" "Can you name the capes on the west coast of Africa?" "What is your favorite color? Green? Blue? Pink? Red? Or yellow?" Sam voted for green. Ladykin chose green *and blue and pink and red and yellow, also purple*. Then you asked, "Which are you most afraid of, the Judgment Day or a Submarine Boat?" Sam chose the Submarine Boat right off, so you had to take the Judgment Day, which was not a very pleasant fear to have for a pet. Ladykin declared that she wasn't afraid of anything in the world except of Being Homely. Wasn't that a silly fear? Then you got a little more intimate and asked, "What is your Father's business?" Sam and Ladykin's Father kept a huge candy store. It was mortifying to have to confess that your Father was only an Artist, but you laid great stress on his large eyes and his long fingers.

Then you three went off to the sandy beach and climbed up on a great huddly gray rock to watch the huge yellow sun go down all shiny and important, like a twenty-dollar gold piece in a wad of pink cotton batting. The tide was going out, too, the mean old "injun-giver," taking back all the pretty, chuckling pebbles, the shining ropes of seaweed, the dear salt secrets it had brought so teasingly to your feet a few hours earlier. You were very lonesome. But not till the

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gold and pink was almost gone from the sky did you screw your courage up to its supreme point. First you threw four stones very far out into the surf, then—

"What—is—your—Mother—like?" you whispered.

Ladykin went to her answer with impetuous certainty:

"Our Mother," she announced, "is fat and short and wears skin-tight dresses, and is President of the Woman's Club, and is sometimes cross."

A great glory came upon you and you clutched for wonder at the choking neck of your little blouse.

"M-y Mother," you said, "m-y Mother is like the Flash of a White Wing across a Stormy Sea!"

You started to say more, but with a wild war-whoop of amusement, Sam lost his balance and fell sprawling into the sand. "Oh, what a funny Mother!" he shouted, but Ladykin jumped down on him furiously and began to kick him with her scarlet sandals. "Hush! hush!" she cried, "Jack's Mother is dead!" and then in an instant she had clambered back to your side again and snuggled her little soft girl-cheek close against yours, while with one tremulous hand she pointed way out beyond the surf line where a solitary, snow-white gull swooped down into the Blue. "Look!" she gasped, "L-o-o-k!" and when you turned to her with a sudden gulping sob, she kissed you warm and sweet upon your lips. [100]

It was not a Father kiss with two tight arms and a scrunching pain. It was not a Grandmother-Lady kiss complimenting your clean face. It was not a Bruno-Clarice kiss, mute and wistful and lappy. There was no pain in it. There was no compliment. There was no doggish fealty. There was just *sweetness*.

Then you looked straight at Ladykin, and Ladykin looked straight at you, looked and *looked* and LOOKED, and you both gasped right out loud before the first miracle of your life, the Miracle of the Mating of Thoughts. Without a word of suggestion, without a word of explanation, you and Ladykin clasped hands and tiptoed stealthily off to the very edge of the water, and knelt down slushily in the sand, and stooped way over, oh, way, way over, with the cold waves squirting up your cuffs; and kissed two perfectly round floaty kisses out to the White Sea-Gull, and after a minute the White Gull rose in the sky, swirled round and round and round, stopped for a second, and then with a wild cry swooped down again into the blue—Once! Twice! and then with a great fountainy splash of wings rose high in the air like a white silk kite and went scudding off like mad into the Grayness, then into the Blackness, then into the Nothingness of the night. And you stayed behind on that pleasant, safe, sandy edge of things with all the sweetness gone from your lips, and nothing left you in all the world but the thudding of your heart, and a queer, sad, salty pucker on your tongue that gave you a thirst not so much for water as for *life*. [101]

Oh, you learned a great deal about living in those first few days and weeks and months at the Grandmother-Lady's house.

You learned, for instance, that if you wanted to *do* things, Boys were best; but if you wanted to *think* things, then Girls were infinitely superior. You, yourself, were part Thinker and part Doer.

Sam was a *doer* from start to finish, strong of limb, long of wind, sturdy of purpose. But Sam was certainly prosy in his head. Ladykin, on the contrary, had "gray matter" that jumped like a squirrel in its cage, and fled hither and yon, and turned somersaults, and leaped through hoops, and was altogether alert beyond description. But she could not *do* things. She could not stay in the nice ocean five minutes without turning blue. She could not climb a tree without falling and bumping her nose. She could not fight without getting mad. Out of these proven facts you evolved a beautiful theory that if Thinky-Girls could only be taught to *do* things, they would make the most perfect playmates in all the wide, wide world. Yet somehow you never made a theory to improve Sam, though Sam's inability to think invariably filled you with a very cross, unholy contempt for him, while Ladykin's inability to *do* only served to thrill you with the most delicious, sweet, puffy pride in *yourself*. [102]

Sam was very evidently a Person. Ladykin was a Feeling. You began almost at once to distinguish between Persons and Feelings. Anything that straightened out your head was a Person. Anything that puckered up your heart was a Feeling. Your Father, you had found out, was a Person. The Grandmother-Lady was a Person. Sam was a Person. Sunshine was a Person. A Horse was a Person. A Chrysanthemum was a Person. But your Mother was a Feeling. And Ladykin was a Feeling. And Bruno-Clarice was a Feeling. And the Ocean Blue was a Feeling. And a Church Organ was a Feeling. And the Smell of a June Rose was a Feeling. Perhaps your Happy-Day was the biggest Feeling of All.

Thursday, to be sure, came only once a week, but—*such a Thursday!* Even now, if you shut your eyes tight and gasp a quick breath, you can sense once more the sweet, crisp joy of fresh, starched clothes, and the pleasant, shiny jingle of new pennies in your small white cotton pockets. White? Yes; your Father had said that always on that day you should go like a little white Flag of Truce on an embassy to Fate. And Happiness? Could anything in the world make more for happiness than to be perfectly clean in the morning and perfectly dirty at night, with something rather frisky to eat for dinner, and Sam and Ladykin invariably invited to supper? Your Happy-Day was your Sacristy, too. Nobody ever punished you on Thursday. Nobody was ever cross to you on Thursday. Even if you were very black-bad the last thing Wednesday night, you were [103]

perfectly, blissfully, lusciously safe until Friday morning.

Oh, a Happy-Day was a very simple thing to manage compared with the terrible difficulties of being kind to everybody named "Clarice." There was *nobody* named Clarice! In all the town, in all the directory, in all the telephone books, you and Ladykin could not find a single person named Clarice. Once in a New York newspaper you read about a young Clarice-Lady of such and such a street who fell and broke her hip; and you took twenty shiny pennies of your money and bought a beautiful, hand-painted celluloid brush-holder and sent it to her; but you never, never heard that it did her any good. You did not want your Father to be mad at you, but Ladykin reasoned you out of your possible worry by showing you how if you ever saw your Father again you could at least plant your feet firmly, fold your arms, puff out your chest, and affirm distinctly: "Dear Father, I have *never* been cruel to *any one* named 'Clarice.'" Ladykin knew perfectly well how to manage it. Ladykin knew perfectly well how to manage everything. [104]

Sam was the stupid one. Sam took a certain pleasure in Bruno-Clarice, but he never realized that Bruno-Clarice was a sacred dog. Sam thought that it was very fine for you to have a Happy-Day, with Clean Clothes, and Ice-Cream, and Pennies, but he never almost *burst* with the wonder of the day.

Sam thought that it was pleasant enough for you to have a dead Mother who was like "the flash of a white wing across a stormy sea," but he did not see any possible connection between that fact and stoning all the white sea-gulls in sight. Ladykin, on the contrary, told Sam distinctly that she'd knock his head off if he ever hit a gull, but fortunately—or unfortunately—Ladykin's aim was not so sure as Sam's. It was you who had to stay behind on the beach and pommel more than half the life out of Sam while Ladykin, pink as a posy in her best muslin, scared to death of wet and cold, plunged out to her little neck in the chopping waves to rescue a quivering fluff of feathers that struggled broken-winged against the cruel, drowning water. "Gulls are gulls!" persisted Sam with every blubbing breath. "Gulls are *Mothers!*" gasped Ladykin, staggering from the surf all drenched and dripping like a bursted water-pail. "Well, boy-gulls are gulls!" Sam screamed in a perfect explosion of outraged *truth*. But Ladykin defied him to the last. Through chattering teeth her vehement reassertion sounded like some horrid, wicked blasphemy: "Nnnnnnnnnnnn-oo! Bbb-o-y ggggg-ggulls are MMMMMM-Mothers too!" Then with that pulsing drench of feathers cuddled close to her breast, she struggled off alone to the house to have the Croup, while you and Sam went cheerily up the beach to find some shiners and some seaweed for your new gull hospital. Not till you were quite an old boy did you ever find out what became of that gull. Sacred Bruno-Clarice ate him. Ladykin, it seems, knew always what had happened to him, but she never dreamed of telling you till you were old enough to bear it. To Ladykin, Truth out of season was sourer than strawberries at Christmas time. [105]

Sam would have told you *anything* the very first second that he found it out. Sam was perfectly great for Truth. He could tell more Great Black Truths in one day than there were thunder-clouds in the whole hot summer sky. This quality made Sam just a little bit dangerous in a crowd. He was always and forever shooting people with Truths that he didn't know were loaded. He was always telling the Grandmother-Lady, for instance, that her hair looked *exactly* like a wig. He was always telling Ladykin that she smelled of raspberry jam. He was always telling you that he didn't believe your Father really loved you. Oh, everything that Sam said was as straight and lank and honest as a lady's hair when it's out of crimp. Nothing in the world could be straighter than that. [106]

But sometimes, when you had played sturdily with Sam for a good many hours, you used to coax Ladykin off all alone to the puffy, scorchy-looking smoke tree, where you could cuddle up on the rustic seat and rest your Honesty. And when you were thoroughly rested, you used to stretch your little arms behind your yawning face and beg:

"Oh, Ladykin, wouldn't you, couldn't you *please* say something curly?"

Ladykin's mind seemed to curl perfectly naturally. The crimp of it never came out. Almost any time you could take her words that looked so little and tight, and unwind them and unwind them into yards and yards and yards of pleasant, magic meanings. [107]

There were no magic meanings in Sam's words. Sam, for instance, could throw as many as a hundred stones into the water, yet when he got through he just lay down in the sand and groaned, "Oh, how tired I am! Oh, how tired I am!" But Ladykin, after she'd thrown only two stones—one that hit the beach, and one that hit you—would stand right up and declare that her arm was "*be-witched*." Tired? No, not a bit of it, but "*be-witched*!" Hadn't she seen, hadn't you seen, hadn't everybody seen that *perfectly awful* sea-witch's head that popped out of the wave just after she had thrown her first stone? Oh, indeed, and it wasn't the first time either that she had been so frightened! Once when she was sitting on the sand counting sea-shells, hadn't the Witch swooped right out of the water and grabbed her legs? So, now if you wanted to break the cruel spell, save Ladykin's life, marry Ladykin, and live in a solid turquoise palace—where all the walls were papered with foreign postage-stamps, and no duplicates—you, not Sam, but *you, you*, chosen of all the world, must go down to the little harbor between the two highest, reariest rocks and stick a spiked stick through every wave that came in. There was no other way! Now you, yourself, might possibly have invented the witch, but you never, never would have thought of harpooning the waves and falling in and drowning your best suit, while Ladykin rested her arms. [108]

Yet in the enforced punishment of an early bedtime you were not bereaved, but lay in rapturous delight untangling the minutest detail of Ladykin's words, till turquoise cities blazed like a turquoise flashlight across your startled senses, wonderful little princes and princesses

kowtowed perpetually to royal Mother Ladykin and royal Father Yourself, and life-sized postage-stamps loomed so lusciously large that envelopes had to be pasted to the corners of stamps instead of stamps to the corners of envelopes. And before you had half straightened out the whole thought, you were fast asleep, and then fast awake, and it was suddenly morning! Oh, it is very comforting to have a playmate who can say curly things.

Sometimes, too, when Sam's and Ladykin's Mother had been rude to them about brushing their teeth or tracking perfectly good mud into the parlor, and Sam had gone off to ease his sorrow, scating hens or stoning cats, you and Ladykin would steal down to the gray rock on the beach to watch the white, soft, pleasant sea-gulls. There were times, you think, when Ladykin wished that *her* Mother was a sea-gull. Then you used to wonder and wonder about your own Mother, and tell Ladykin all over again about the creaky, black-oak library, and the smoky, smelly hearth-fire with the hurt red book, and the blue-flowered muslin sleeve beckoning and beckoning to you; and Ladykin used to explain to you how, very evidently, you were the only souvenir that your Father did not burn. With that thought in mind, you used to try and guess what could possibly have happened long ago on a Thursday to make a Happy-Day forever and ever. Ladykin said that of course it was something about "Love," but when you ran off to ask the Grandmother-Lady just exactly what Love was, the Grandmother-Lady only laughed and said that Love was a fever that came along a few years after chicken-pox and measles and scarlet fever. Ladykin was saucy about it. "That may be *true*," Ladykin acknowledged, "but *t'aint so!*" Then you went and found Sam and asked him if he knew what Love was. Sam knew at once. Sam said that Love was the feeling that one had for mathematics. Now that was all *bosh*, for the feeling that you and Ladykin had for Mathematics would not have made a Happy-Day for a cow.

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But even if there were a great many things that you could not find out, it was a good deal of fun to grow up. Apart from a few stomach-aches and two or three gnawing pains in the calves of your legs, aging was a most alluring process.

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Springs, summers, autumns, winters, went hurtling over one another, till all of a sudden, without the slightest effort on your part, you were fifteen years old, Bruno-Clarice had grown to be a sober, industrious, middle-aged dog, Sam was idolatrously addicted to geometry, and Ladykin subscribed to a fashion magazine for the benefit of her paper dolls.

Most astonishing of all, however, your Father had invited you to go to Germany and visit him. It was a glorious invitation. You were all athrill with the geography and love of it. Already your nostrils crinkled to the lure of tar and oakum. Already your vision feasted on the parrot-colored crowds of Come-igrants and Go-igrants that huddled along the wharves with their eager, jabbering faces and their soggy, wadded feet.

Oh, the prospect of the journey was a most beautiful experience, but when the actual Eve of Departure came, the scissors of separation gleamed rather hard and sharp in the air, and you hunched your neck a little bit wincingly before the final crunching snip. That last evening was a dreadful evening. The Cook sat sobbing in the kitchen. The Grandmother-Lady's eyes were red with sewing. The air was all heavy with *goingawayness*. To escape the strangle of it, you fled to the beach with Bruno-Clarice tagging in mournful excitement at your heels, his smutty nose all a-sniff with the foreboding leathery smell of trunks and bags. There on the beach in a scoopy hollow of sand backed up against the old gray rock were Sam and Ladykin. Sam's round, fat face was fretted like a pug-dog's, and Ladykin's eyes were blinky-wet with tears.

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It was not a pleasant time to say good-by. It had been a beautiful, smooth-skied day, crisp and fresh and bright-colored as a "Sunday supplement"; but now the clouds piled gray and crumpled in the west like a poor stale, thrown-away newspaper, with just a sputtering blaze in one corner like the kindling of a half-hearted match.

"*Please* be kind to Bruno-Clarice," you began; "I shall miss you very much—very, very much. But I will come back—"

"N—o, I do not think you will come back," said Ladykin. "You will go to Germany to live with your Father and your Play-Mother, and you will gargle all your words like a throat tonic till you don't know how to be friends in English any more; and even if you did come back Bruno-Clarice would bark at you, and I shall be married, and Sam will have a long, black beard."

Now you could have borne Ladykin's marriage; you could even have borne Bruno-Clarice's barking at you; but you could not, simply could not bear the thought of Sam's growing a long black beard without you. Even Ladykin with all her wonderfulness sat utterly helpless before the terrible, unexpected climax of her words. It was Sam who leaped into the breach. The clutch of his hand was like the grit of sand-paper. "Jack," he stammered, "Jack, I promise you—anyhow I won't *cut* my beard until you come!"

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It was certainly only the thought of Sam's faithful beard that sustained you on your rough, blue voyage to Germany. It was certainly only the thought of Sam's faithful beard that rallied your smitten forces when you met your Father face to face and saw him reel back white as chalk against the silky shoulder of your Play-Mother, and hide his eyes behind the crook of his elbow.

It is not pleasant to make people turn white as chalk, even in Germany. Worse yet, every day your Father grew whiter and whiter and whiter, and every day your pretty Play-Mother wrinkled

her forehead more and more in a strange, hurty sort of trouble. Never once did you dare think of Ladykin. Never once did you dare think of Bruno-Clarice. You just named all your upper teeth "Sam," and all your lower teeth "Sam," and ground them into each other all day long—"Sam! Sam! Sam! Sam!" over and over and over. There were also no Happy-Days in Germany, and nobody ever spoke of Clarice.

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You were pretty glad at last after a month when your Father came to you with his most beautiful face and his most loving hands, and said:

"Little Boy Jack, there is no use in it. You have got to go away again. You are a wound that will not heal. It is your Dear Mother's eyes. It is your Dear Mother's mouth. It is your Dear Mother's smile. God forgive me, but I cannot bear it! I am going to send you away to school in England."

You put your finger cautiously up to your eyes and traced their round, firm contour. Your Mother's eyes? They felt like two heaping teaspoonfuls of tears. Your Mother's mouth? Desperately you poked it into a smile. "Going to send me away to school in England?" you stammered. "Never mind. Sam will not cut his beard until I come."

"*What?*" cried your Father in a great voice. "*W-h-a-t?*"

But you pretended that you had not said anything, because it was boy-talk and your Father would not have understood it.

Never, never, never had you seen your Father so suffering; yet when he took you in his arms and raised your face to his and quizzed you: "Little Boy Jack, do you love me? Do you love me?" you scanned him out of your Mother's made-over eyes and answered him out of your Mother's made-over mouth:

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"N—o! N—o! I *don't* love you!"

And he jumped back as though you had knifed him, and then laughed out loud as though he were glad of the pain.

"But I ask you this," he persisted, and the shine in his eyes was like a sunset glow in the deep woods, and the touch of his hands would have lured you into the very heart of the flame. "It is not probable," he said, "that your Dear Mother's child and mine will go through Life without knowing Love. When your Love-Time comes, if you understand all Love's tragedies *then*, and forgive me, will you send me a message?"

"Oh, yes," you cried out suddenly. "Oh, yes! Oh, yes! Oh, yes!" and clung to him frantically with your own boyish hands, and kissed him with your Mother's mouth. But you did not love him. It was your Mother's mouth that loved him.

So you went away to school in England and grew up and up and up some more; but somehow this latter growing up was a dull process without savor, and the years went by as briefly and inconsequently as a few dismissing sentences in a paragraph. There were plenty of people to work with and play with, but almost no one to think with, and your hard-wrought book knowledge faded to nothingness compared to the three paramount convictions of your youthful experience, namely, that neither coffee nor ocean nor Life tasted as good as it smelled.

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And then when you were almost twenty-one you met "Clarice"!

It was a Christmas supper party in a café. Some one looked up suddenly and called the name "Clarice! Clarice!" and when your startled eyes shot to the mark and saw her there in her easy, dashing, gorgeous beauty, something in your brain curdled, and all the lonesomeness, all the mystery, all the elusiveness of Life pounded suddenly in your heart like a captured Will-o'-the-Wisp. "Clarice?" Here, then, was the end of your journey? The eternal kindness? The flash of a white wing across *your* stormy sea? "Clarice!" And you looked across unbidden into her eyes and smiled at her a gaspy, astonished smile that brought the strangest light into her face.

Oh, but Clarice was very beautiful! Never had you seen such a type. Her hair was black and solemn as crape. Her eyes were bright and noisy as jet. Her heart was barren as a blot of ink. And she took your dreamy, paper-white boy life and scourged it like a tongue of flame across a field of Easter lilies!

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And when the wonder of the flame was gone, you sat aghast in your room among the charred, scorched fragments of your Youth. The thirst for death was very strong upon you, and the little, long, narrow cup of your revolver gleamed very brimming full of death's elixir. Even the June-time could not save you. Your Mother's name was an agony on your lips. The frenzied reiteration of your thoughts scraped on your brain like a sledge on gravel. You would drink very deep, you thought, of your little slim cup of death. Yet the thing that was tortured within you was scarcely Love, and you had no message of understanding for your Father. Just with wrecked life, wrecked faith, wrecked courage, you huddled at your desk, catching your breath for a second before you should reach out your fretted fingers for the little cool cunning, toy hand of Death.

"Once again," you said to yourself, "once again I will listen to the children's voices in the garden. Once again I will lure the smell of June roses into my heart." The children prattled and passed. Your hand reached out and fumbled. Once more you shut your scalding eyes, hunched up your shoulders, and breathed in like an ultimate tide the ravishing sweetness of the June—one breath, another, another—longer—longer. Oh, God in Heaven, if one could only die of such an

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anesthetic—smothered with sweetbrier, spiced with saffron, buried in bride roses. *Die?* Your wild hand leaped to the task and faltered stricken before the strange, grim fact that blazed across your consciousness. It was Thursday. It was your "Happy-Day!" Your Father's words came pounding back like blows into your sore brain! Your "Happy-Day!" "No cruelty must ever defame it, no malice, no gross bitterness!" Somewhere in air or sky or sea there was a Mother-Woman who must not be *hurt*. Your "Happy-Day?" HAPPY-DAY? Rage and sorrow broke like a fearful storm across your senses, and you put down your head and cried like a child.

Tears? Again you felt on your lips that queer, sad, salty pucker, that taste of the sea that gave you a thirst not so much for water as for Life. *Life? Life?* The thought thrilled through you like new nerves. Your ashy pulses burst into flame. Your dull heart jumped. Your vision woke. Your memory quickened. You saw the ocean, blue, blue, blue before you. You saw a small, rude boy lie sprawling in the sand. You saw a little girl's face, wild with wonder, tremulous with sweetness. You felt again the flutter of a kiss against your cheek. The little girl who—understood. Your salt lips puckered into a smile, and the smile ran back like a fuse into the inherent happiness of your heart. Sam? Ladykin? Home? You began to laugh! Haggard, harried, wrecked, ruined, you began to laugh! Then, faltering like a hysterical girl, you staggered down the stairs, out of the house, along the streets to the cable office, and sent a message to Sam. [118]

"How long is your beard?" the message said. "How long is your beard?" Just that silly, magic message across miles and miles and miles of waves and seaweeds. How the great cable must have simpered with the foolishness of it. How the pink coral must have chuckled. How the big, tin-foiled fishes must have wondered.

You did not wait for an answer. What answer was there? You could picture Sam standing in stupefied awkwardness before the amazing nothingness of such a message. But Ladykin would remember. Oh, yes, Ladykin would remember. You could see her peering past Sam's shoulder and snatching out suddenly for the fluttering paper. Ladykin would remember. What were six years?

Joy sang in your heart like a purr of a sea-shell. The blue blur of ocean, the dear green smell of mignonette, the rush of wind through the poplar trees were tonic memories to you. You did not wait to pack your things. You did not wait to notify your Father. You sped like a wild boy to the first wharf, to the first steamer that you could find. [119]

The week's ocean voyage went by like a year. The silly waves dragged on the steamer like a tired child on the skirts of its mother. Haste raged in your veins like a fever. You wanted to throw all the fat, heavy passengers overboard. You wanted to swim ahead with a towing rope in your teeth. You wanted to kill the Captain when he stuttered. You wanted to flay the cook for serving an extra course for dinner. Yet all the while the huge machinery throbbed in rhythm, "Time *will* pass. It *always* does. It *always* does. It *always* does."

And then at last you stood again on your Native Land, *alive, well, vital, at home!*

With the sensation of an unbroken miracle, you found your way again to the little Massachusetts sea town, along the peaceful village walk to the big brown house that turned so bleakly to the street. There on the steps, wonder of wonders, you found two elderly people, Bruno-Clarice and the Grandmother-Lady, and your knees gave out very suddenly and you sank down beside Bruno-Clarice and smothered the bark right out of him.

"Good lack!" cried the Grandmother-Lady, "Good *lack!*" and made so much noise that Sam himself came running like mad from the next house; and though he had no beard, you liked him very much and shook and shook his hand until he squealed. [120]

With the Grandmother-Lady plying you with questions, and Sam feeling your muscle, and Bruno-Clarice trying to crawl into your lap like a pug-dog baby, it was almost half an hour before you had a chance to ask,

"Where is Ladykin?"

"She's down on the beach," said Sam. "I'll go and help you find her."

You looked at Sam speculatively. "I'll give you ten dollars if you won't," you said.

Sam considered the matter gravely before he began to grin. "I wouldn't think of charging you more than five," he acquiesced.

So you went off with Bruno-Clarice hobbling close at your heels to find Ladykin for yourself. When you saw her she was perched up on the very top of the huddly gray rock playing tinkle tunes on her mandolin, and you stole up so quietly behind her that she did not see you till you were close beside her.

Then she turned very suddenly and looked down upon you and pretended that she did not know you, with her color coming and going all luminous and intermittent like a pink and white flashlight. In six years you had not seen such a wonderful playmatey face. [121]

"Who are you?" she asked. "Who are you?"

"I am 'Little Boy Jack' come back to marry you," you began, but something in the wistful, shy girl-tenderness of her face and eyes choked your bantering words right off in your throat.

"Yes, Ladykin," you said, "I have come home, and I am very tired, and I am very sad, and I am very lonesome, and I have not been a very good boy. But please be good to me! I am so lonesome I cannot wait to make love to you. Oh, *please, please* love me *n-o-w*. I *need* you to love me N-O-W!"

Ladykin frowned. It was not a cross frown. It was just a sort of a cosy corner for her thoughts. Surprise cuddled there, and a sorry feeling, and a great tenderness.

"You have not been a very good boy?" she repeated after you.

The memory of a year crowded blackly upon you. "No," you said, "I have not been a very good boy, and I am very suffering-sad. But *please* love me, and forgive me. No one has ever loved me!"

The surprise and the sorry feeling in Ladykin's forehead crowded together to make room for something that was just *womanliness*. She began to smile. It was the smile of a hurt person when the opiate first begins to overtake the pain. [122]

"Oh, I'm sure it was an accidental badness," she volunteered softly. "If I were accidentally bad, you would forgive *me*, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes," you stammered, and reached up your lonesome hands to her.

"Then you don't have to make love," she whispered. "It's all made," and slipped down into your arms.

But something troubled her, and after a minute she pushed you away and tried to renounce you.

"But it is not Thursday," she sobbed; "it is Wednesday; and my name is not 'Clarice'; it is Ladykin."

Then all the boyishness died out of you—the sweet, idle reveries, the mystic responsibilities. You shook your Father's dream from your eyes, and squared your shoulders for your own realities.

"A Man must make his own Happy-Day," you cried, "and a Man must choose his own Mate!"

Before your vehemence Ladykin winced back against the rock and eyed you fearsomely.

"Oh, I will love you and cherish you," you pleaded.

But Ladykin shook her head. "That is not enough," she whispered. There was a kind of holy scorn in her eyes. [123]

Then a White Gull flashed like an apparition before your sight. Ladykin's whole figure drooped, her cheek paled, her little mouth quivered, her vision narrowed. There with her eyes on the White Gull and your eyes fixed on hers, you saw her shy thoughts journey into the Future. You saw her eyes smile, sadden, brim with tears, smile again, and come homing back to you with a timid, glad surprise as she realized that your thoughts too had gone all the long journey with her.

She reached out one little hand to you. It was very cold.

"If I should pass like the flash of a white wing," she questioned, "would you be true to me—and *mine*?"

The Past, the Present, the Future rushed over you in tumult. Your lips could hardly crowd so big a vow into so small a word. "Oh, YES, YES, YES!" you cried.

In reverent mastery you raised her face to yours. "A Man must make his own Happy-Day," you repeated. "A Man must make his own Happy-Day!"

Timorously, yet assentingly, she came back to your arms. The whisper of her lips against your ear was like the flutter of a rose petal. [124]

"It will be Wednesday, then," she said, "for us and—ours."

Clanging a strident bell across the magic stillness of the garden, Sam bore down upon you like a steam-engine out of tune.

"Oh, I say," he shouted, "for heaven's sake cut it out and come to supper."

The startled impulse of your refusal faded before the mute appeal in Ladykin's eyes.

"All right," you answered; "but first I must go and cable 'love' to my Father."

"Oh, hurry!" cried Ladykin. Her word was crumpled and shy as a kiss.

"Oh, hurry!" cried Sam. His thought was straight and frank as a knife and fork.

Joy sang in your heart like a prayer that rhymed. Your eager heart was pounding like a race horse. The clouds in the sky were scudding to sunset. The surf on the beach seemed all out of breath. The green meadow path to the village stretched like the paltriest trifle before a man's fleet running pace.

"But I can't hurry," you said, for Bruno-Clarice came poking his grizzled old nose into your

hand. "Oh, wait for me," he seemed to plead. "Oh, please, *please* wait for me."

THE RUNAWAY ROAD

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THE Road ran spitefully up a steep, hot, rocky, utterly shadeless hill, and then at the top turned suddenly in a flirty little green loop, and looked back, and called "Follow me!"

Wouldn't you have considered that a dare?

The Girl and the White Pony certainly took it as such, and proceeded at once to "follow," though the White Pony stumbled clatteringly on the rolling stones, and the Girl had to cling for dear life to the rocking pommels of her saddle.

It was a cruel climb, puff—pant—scramble—dust—glare—every step of the way, but when the two adventurers really reached the summit at last, a great dark chestnut-tree loomed up for shade, every sweet-smelling breeze in the world was there to welcome them, and the whole green valley below stretched out before them in the shining, woody wonder of high noon and high June.

You know, yourself, just how the world looks and feels and smells at high noon of a high June!

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Even a pony stands majestically on the summit of a high hill—neck arched, eyes rolling, mane blowing, nostrils quivering. Even a girl feels a tug of power at her heart.

And still the Road cried "Follow me!" though it never turned its head again in doubt or coquetry. It was a kind-looking Road now, all gracious and sweet and tender, with rusty green overhead, and soft green underfoot, and the pleasant, buzzing drone of bees along its clovered edges.

"We might just as well follow it and see," argued the Girl, and the White Pony took the suggestion with a wild leap and cantered eagerly along the desired way.

It was such an extraordinarily lonesome Road that you could scarcely blame it for picking up companionship as best it might. There was stretch after stretch of pasture, and stretch after stretch of woodland, and stretch after stretch of black-stumped clearing—with never a house to cheer it, or a human echo to break its ghostly stillness. Yet with all its isolation and remoteness the landscape had that certain vibrant, vivid air of self-consciousness that thrills you with an uncanny sense of an invisible presence—somewhere. It's just a trick of June!

Tramps, pirates, even cannibals, seemed deliciously imminent. The Girl remembered reading once of a lonely woman bicyclist who met a runaway circus elephant at the turn of a country road. Twelve miles from home is a long way off to have anything happen.

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Her heart began to quicken with the joyous sort of fear that is one of the prime sweets of youth. It's only when fear reaches your head that it hurts. The loneliness, the mystery, the uncertainty, were tonic to her. The color spotted in her cheeks. Her eyes narrowed defensively to every startling detail of woods or turf. Her ears rang with the sudden, new acuteness of her hearing. She felt as though she and the White Pony were stalking right across the heartstrings of the earth. Once the White Pony caught his foot and sent a scared sob into her throat.

Oh, everything was magic! A little brown rabbit reared up in the Road as big as a kangaroo, and beckoned her with his ears. A red-winged blackbird bulky as an eagle trumpeted a swamp-secret to her as he passed. A tiny chipmunk in the wall loomed like a lion in his lair, and sent a huge rock crashing like an avalanche into the field. The whole green and blue world seemed tingling with toy noises, made suddenly big.

The White Pony's mouth was frothing with the curb. The White Pony's coat was reeking wet with noon and nervousness, but the Girl sat tense and smiling and important in her saddle, as though just once for all time she was the only italicized word in the Book of Life.

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"It's just the kind of a road that I like to travel alone," she gasped, a little breathlessly, "but if I were engaged and my man let me do it, I should consider him—careless."

That was exactly the sort of Road it was!

Yet after three or four miles the White Pony shook all the skittishness out of his feet, and settled down to a zigzag, browsing-clover gait, and the Girl relaxed at last, and sat loosely to ease her own muscles, and slid the bridle trustingly across the White Pony's neck.

Then she began to sing. Never in all her life had she sung outside the restricting cage of house or church. A green and blue loneliness on a June day is really the only place in the world that is big enough for singing! In dainty ballad, in impassioned hymn, in opera, in anthem, the Girl's voice, high and sweet and wild as a boy's, rang out in fluttering tremolo. Over and over again, as though half unconscious of the words, but enraptured with the melody, she dwelt at last on that

dream-song of every ecstatic young soul who tarries for a moment on the edge of an unfocused exultation:

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The King of Love my Shepherd is
Whose Goodness faileth never,
I nothing lack if I am *his*
And he is *mine f-o-r-e-v-e-r!*
Forever!---Is *mine f-o-r-e-v-e-r!*

Her pulsing, passionate crescendo came echoing back to her from a gray granite hillside, and sent a reverent thrill of power across her senses.

Then—suddenly—into her rhapsody broke the astonishing, harsh clash and clatter of a hay-rake. The White Pony lurched, stood stock-still, gave a hideous snort of terror, grabbed the bit in his teeth, and bolted like mad on and on and on and on till a quick curve in the Road dashed him into the very lap of a tiny old gray farmhouse that completely blocked the way.

In another second he would have stumbled across the threshold and hurled his rider precipitously into the front hall if she had not at that very second recovered her "yank-hold" on his churning mouth and wrenched him back so hard that any animal but a horse would have sat down.

Then the girl straightened up very tremblingly in her saddle and said "O—h!"

Some one had to say something, for there in the dooryard close beside her were an Artist, a Bossy, and a White Bulldog, who all instantaneously, without the slightest cordiality or greeting, stopped whatever they were doing and began to stare at her.

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Now it's all very well to go dashing like mad into a person's front yard on a runaway horse. Anybody could see that you didn't do it on purpose; but when at last you have stopped dashing, what are you going to do next, particularly when the Road doesn't go any farther? Shall you say, "Isn't this a pleasant summer?" or "What did you really like best at the theater last winter?" If you gallop out it looks as though you were frightened. If you amble out, you might hear some one laugh behind your back, which is infinitely worse than being grabbed on the stairs.

The situation was excessively awkward. And the Artist evidently was not clever in conversational emergencies.

The Girl straightened her gray slouch hat. Then she ran the cool metal butt of her riding-whip back and forth under the White Pony's sweltering mane. Then she swallowed very hard once or twice and remarked inanely:

"Did the Road go right into the house?"

"Yes," said the Artist, with a nervous blue dab at his canvas.

The Girl's ire rose at his churlishness. "If that is so," she announced, "if the Road really went right into the house, I'll just wait here a minute till it comes out again."

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But the Artist never smiled an atom to make things easier, though the Bossy began to tug most joyously at his chain, and the White Bulldog rolled over and over with delight.

The Girl would have given anything now to escape at full speed down the Road along which she had come, but escape of that sort had suddenly assumed the qualities of a panicky, ignominious retreat, so she parried for time by riding right up behind the Artist and watching him change a perfectly blue canvas sky into a regular tornado.

"Oh, do you think it's going to rain as hard as that?" she teased. "Perhaps I'd better settle down here until the storm is over."

But the Artist never smiled or spoke. He just painted and sniffed as though he worked by steam, and when his ears had finally grown so crimson that apoplexy seemed impending, she took pity on his miserable embarrassment and backed even the shadow of her pony out of his sight. Then with a desperate effort at perfect ease she remarked:

"Well—I guess I'll ride round to your back door. Perhaps the Road came out that way and went on without me."

But though she and the White Pony hunted in every direction through white birch and swaying alders, they found no possible path by which the Road could have escaped, and were obliged at last to return with some hauteur, and make as dignified an exit as possible from the scene.

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The Artist bowed with stiff relief at their departure, but the White Bulldog preceded them with friendly romps and yells, and the Bossy pulled up his iron hitching stake and chain and came clanking after them with furious bounds and jingles.

No one but the White Pony would have stood the racket for a moment, and even the White Pony began to feel a bit staccato in his feet. The Girl kept her saddle like a circus rider, but the amusement on her face was just a trifle studied. It was a fine procession, clamor and all, with the Bulldog scouting ahead, the White Pony following skittishly, and the Bossy see-sawing behind, clanking a dungeon chain that left a cloud of dust as far as you could see.

It must have startled the Youngish Man who loomed up suddenly at a bend of the Road and caught the wriggling Bulldog in his arms.

"Who comes here?" he cried with a regular war-whoop of a challenge. "Who comes here?"

"Just a lady and a bossy," said the Girl, as she reined in the Pony abruptly, and sent the Bossy caroming off into the bushes. [135]

"But it's my brother's Bossy," protested the Youngish Man.

"Oh, no, it isn't," the Girl explained a little wearily. "It's mine now. It chose between us."

The Youngish Man eyed her with some amusement.

"Did you really see my brother at the house?" he probed.

The Girl nodded, flushing. It was very hot, and she was beginning to feel just a wee bit faint and hungry and irritable.

"Yes, I saw your brother," she reiterated, "but I didn't seem to care for him. I rode by mistake right into the picture he was painting. There's probably paint all over me. It was very awkward, and he didn't do a thing to make it easier. I abominate that kind of person. If a man can't do anything else he can always ask you if you wouldn't like a drink of water!" She scowled indignantly. "It was the Road's fault anyway! I was just exploring, and the Road cried 'Follow me,' and I followed—a little faster than I meant to—and the Road ran right into your house and shut the door. Oh, *slammed* the door right in my face!"

"Would you like a drink of water, *now*?" suggested the Youngish Man.

"No, I thank you," said the Girl, with stubborn dignity, and then weakened to the alluring offer with "But my White Pony is very cruelly thirsty." [136]

Both adventurers looked pretty jaded with heat and dust.

The Youngish Man led the way into a tiny, pungent wood-path that ended in a gurgling spring-hole, where the White Pony nuzzled his nose with deep-breathed, dripping satisfaction, while the Girl kept to her saddle and looked down on the Youngish Man with frank interest.

He looked very picturesque and brown and clever in his khaki suit with a game bag slung across his shoulder.

"You're not a hunter," she exclaimed impulsively. "You're not a hunter—because you haven't any gun."

"No," said the Man, "I'm a collector."

The Girl cried out with pleasure and clapped her hands. "A collector?—oh, goody! So am I! What do you collect? Minerals? Oh—dear! *Mine* is lots more interesting. I collect adventures."

"Adventures?" The Man made no slightest effort to conceal his amused curiosity. "Adventures? Now I call that a jolly thing to collect. Is it a good country to work in? And what have you found?"

The Girl smiled at him appreciatively—a little flitting, whimsical sort of smile, and commenced to rummage in the blouse of her white shirt-waist, from which she finally produced a small, red-covered notebook. She fluttered its diminutive pages for a second, and then began to laugh. [137]

"You'd better sit down if you really want to hear what I've found."

The Man dropped comfortably into place beside the spring and watched her. She was very watchable. Some people have to be beautiful to rivet your attention. Some people *don't* have to be. It's all a matter of temperament. Her hair was very, very brown, though, and her eyes were deep and wide and hazel, and the red in her cheeks came and went with every throb of her heart.

"Of course," she explained apologetically, "of course I haven't found a lot of things yet—I've only been working at it a little while. But I've collected a 'Runaway Accident with the Rural Free-Delivery Man.' It was awfully scary and interesting. And I've collected a 'Den of Little Foxes Down in the Woods Back of My House,' and 'Two Sunrises with a Crazy Woman who Thinks that the Sun Can't Get Up Until She Does,' and I've collected a 'Country Camp-Meeting all Hallelujahs and By Goshes,' and a 'Circus Where I Spent All Day with the Snake-Charmer,' and a 'Midnight Ride Alone through the Rosedale Woods in a Thunder-Storm.' Of course, as I say, I haven't found a lot of things yet, but then it's only the middle of June and I have two more weeks' vacation yet." [138]

The Man put back his head and laughed, but it was a pleasant sort of laugh that flooded all the stern lines in his face.

"I'm sure I never thought of making a regular business of collecting adventures," he admitted, "but it certainly is a splendid idea. But aren't you ever afraid?" he asked. "Aren't you ever afraid, for instance, riding round on a lonesome trip like this?"

The Girl laughed. "Yes," she acknowledged, "I'm often afraid of—squirrels—and falling twigs—and black-looking stumps. I'm often afraid of toy noises and toy fears—but I never saw a real fear in all my life. Even when you jumped up in the Road I wasn't afraid of you—because you are a gentleman—and—gentlemen are my friends."

"Have you many friends?" asked the Man. The question seemed amusingly justifiable. "You look to me about eighteen. Girls of your age are usually too busy collecting Love to collect anything else—even ideas. Have you collected any Love?"

The Girl threw out her hands in joking protest. "Collected any Love? Why, I don't even know what Love looks like! Maybe what I'd collect would be—poison ivy." Her eyes narrowed a little. Her voice quivered the merest trifle. "There's a Boy at Home—who talks—a little—about it. But how can I tell that it's Love?" [139]

Her sudden vehemency startled him. "Where *is* 'Home'?" he asked.

For immediate answer the Girl slipped down from the White Pony's back, and loosened the saddle creakingly before she helped herself to a long, dripping draught from the birch cup that hung just over the spring.

"You're nice to talk to," she acknowledged, "and almost no one is nice to talk to. It's a whole year since I've talked right out to any one! Where do I live? Well, my headquarters are in New York, but my heartquarters are over at Rosedale. There's quite a difference, you know!"

"Yes," said the Man, "I remember—there used to—be—quite a difference. But how did you ever happen to think of collecting adventures?"

The girl pulled at the White Pony's mane for a long, hesitating moment, then she turned and looked searchingly into the Man's face. She very evidently liked what she saw.

"I collect adventures because I am lonesome!" Her voice shook a little, but her eyes were frankly untroubled. "I collect adventures because the life that interests me doesn't happen to come to me, and I have to go out and search for it!—I'm companion all the year to a woman who doesn't know right from wrong in any dear, big sense, but who could define propriety and impropriety to you till your ears split. And all her friends are just like her. They haven't any mental muscle to them. It's just dress and etiquette, dress and etiquette, dress and etiquette! So I have to live all alone in my head, and think and think and think, till my poor brain churns and overlaps like a surf without any shore. Do you know what I mean? Then when my June vacation comes, I run right off to Rosedale and collect all the adventures I possibly can to take back with me for the long dreary year. Things to think about, you know, when I have to sit up at night giving medicine, or when I have to mend heavy black silk clothes, or when the dinners are so long that I could scream over the extra delay of a salad course. So I make June a sort of pranky, fancy-dress party for my soul. Do you know what I mean?" [140]

"Yes, I know what you mean," said the Man. "I know just what you mean. You mean you're eighteen. That's the whole of it. You mean that there's no fence to your pasture, no bottom to your cup, no crust to your bread. You mean that you can't sleep at night for the pounding of your heart. You mean most of all that there's no limit to your vision. You're inordinately keen after life. That's all. You'll get over it!" [141]

"*I won't get over it!*" There was fire in the Girl's eyes and she drew her breath sharply. "I say I *won't* get over it! There's nothing on earth that could stale me! If I live to be a hundred I sha'n't wither!—why, how could I?"

Buoyant, blooming, aquiver with startled emotions, she threw out her hands with a passionate gesture of protest.

The Man shook his shoulders and jumped up. "Perhaps you're right," he muttered. "Perhaps you *are* the kind that won't ever grow old. If you are—Heaven help you! Youth's nothing but a wound, anyway. Do you want to be a wound that never heals?" He laughed stridently.

Then the Girl began to fumble through sudden tears at the buckles of her saddle. Her growing hunger and faintness and the heat of the day were telling on her.

"You must think me a crazy fool," she confessed, "the way I have plunged into personalities. Why, I could go a whole year with an alien running-mate and never breathe a word or a sigh about myself, but with some people—the second you see them you know they are part of your chord. Chord is the only term in music that I understand, and I understand that as though I had made the word myself." She tried to laugh. "Now I'm going home! I've had a good time. You seem almost like a friend. I've never had a talky friend." [142]

And she was in her saddle and half-way down the wood-path before his mind quickened to cry out "Stop! Wait a minute!"

A little out of breath he caught up with her, and stood for a moment like an embarrassed schoolboy, though his face in the sunlight was as old as young forty.

"I'm afraid you haven't had much of an adventure this morning," he volunteered whimsically. "If you really want an adventure why don't you come back to the house and have dinner with my brother and me? There's no one else there. Think how it would tease my brother! You're twelve or fifteen miles from home, and it's already two o'clock and very hot. My brother has done some pictures that are going to be talked about next winter, and I—I've got rather a conspicuous position ahead of me in Washington. Wouldn't it amuse you a little bit afterward, if any one spoke of us, to remember our little farmhouse dinner to-day?—Would you be afraid to come?" His last question was very direct.

A look came into the Girl's eyes that was very good for a man to see.

"Why, of course I wouldn't be afraid to come," she said. "Gentlemen are my friends."

But she was shy about going, just the same, with a certain frank, boyish shyness that only served to emphasize the general artlessness of her verve.

With a quick dive into the bushes the Man collared the Bossy and transferred his clanking chain to the bit of the astonished White Pony.

"Now you've got to come," he laughed up at her, and the whole party started back for the tiny old gray farmhouse where the Artist greeted them with sad concern.

"I've brought Miss Girl back to have dinner with us," announced the Pony-leader cheerfully, relying on his brother's serious nature to overlook any strangeness of nomenclature. "You evidently didn't remember meeting her at Mrs. Moyne's house-party last spring?"

The Girl fell readily into the game. She turned the White Pony loose in the dooryard, and then went into the queer old kitchen, rolled up her sleeves, wound herself round with a blue-checked apron, and commenced to work. She had a deft touch at household matters, and the Man followed her about as humbly as though he himself had not been adequately providing meals for the past two months.

The color rose high in the Girl's cheeks, and her voice took on the thrill and breathiness of amused excitement. Wherever she found a huddle of best china or linen or silver she raided it for her use, and the table flared forth at last with a dainty, inconsequent prettiness that quite defied the Artist's prescribed rules for beauty. [144]

It was a funny dinner, with an endless amount of significant bantering going on right under the Artist's sunburned nose. Yet for all the mirth of the situation, the Girl had quite a chance to study the face of her special host, in all its full detail of worldliness, of spirituality, of hardness, of sweetness. Her final impression, as her first one, was of a wonderful affinity and congeniality. "His face is like a harbor for all my stormy thoughts," was the way she described it to herself.

After dinner the three washed up the dishes as sedately as though they had been working together day-in, day-out through the whole season, and after that the Artist escaped as quickly as possible to catch a cloud effect which he seemed to consider preposterously vital.

Then with a dreary little feeling of a prize-pleasure all spent and gone, the Girl went over to the mirror in the sitting-room and pinned on her gray slouch hat and patted her hair and straightened her belt.

But it was not her own reflection that interested her most. The mirror made a fine frame for the whole quaint room, with its dingy landscape wall-paper from which the scarlet petticoat of a shepherdess or the vivid green of a garland stood out with cheerful crudity. The battered, blackened fireplace was lurid here and there with gleams of copper kettles, and a huge gray cat purred comfortably in the curving seat of a sun-baked rocking-chair. [145]

It was a good picture to take home in your mind for remembrance, when walls should be brick and rooms ornate and life hackneyed, and the Girl shut her eyes for a second, experimentally, to fix the vision in her consciousness.

When she opened her eyes again the Man was struggling through the doorway dragging a small, heavy trunk.

"Oh, don't go yet!" he exclaimed. "Here are a lot of your things in this trunk. I brought them in to show you."

And he dragged the trunk to the middle of the room and knelt down on the floor and commenced to unlock it.

"My things?" cried the Girl in amazement, and ran across the room and sat down on the floor beside him. "My things?"

There was a funny little twist to the Man's mouth that never relaxed all the time he was tinkering with the lock. "Yes—*your* things," was all he said till the catch yielded finally, and he raised the cover to display the full contents to his companion's curious eyes. [146]

"Oh—*books!*" she cried out, with a sudden, sweeping flush of comprehension, and darted her hand into the dusty pile and pulled out a well-worn copy of the Rubaiyat. Instinctively she clasped it to her.

"I thought so!" said the Youngish Man quizzically. "I thought that was one of your books.

"When Time lets slip a little, perfect hour,
Oh, take it—for it will not come again."

His eyes narrowed, and his hands reached nervously to regain possession of the volume. Then he laughed.

"I, also, used to think that Life was made for me," he scoffed teasingly. "It's a glorious idea—as long as it lasts! You take every harsh old happening and every flimsy friendship and line it with your own silk, and then sit by and say, 'Oh, *isn't* the



Instinctively she clasped it to her

World a rustly, shimmery, luxurious place!' And all the time the happening *is* harsh, and the friendship *is* flimsy, and it's just your own perishable silk lining that does the rustle and the shimmer and the luxury act. Oh, I suppose that's 'woman talk' about silk linings, but I know a thing or two, even if I am a man."

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But the radiancy of the Girl's face defied his cynicism utterly. Her eyes were absolutely fathomless with Youth.

Then his mood changed suddenly. He reached out with a little brooding gesture of protection. "These are my college books," he confided, "my Dream Library. I've scarcely thought of them for a dozen years. I don't meet many dreamers nowadays. You've probably got a lot of newer books than these, but I'll wager you anything in the world that every book here is a precious friend to you. I shouldn't wonder if your own copies opened exactly to the same places. Here's young Keats with his shadowing tragedy. How you have mooned over it. And here's Tennyson. What about the starlit vision:

"And on her lover's arm she leant,
And round her waist she felt it fold,—"

The Girl took up the words softly in unison:

"And far across the hills they went
To that new world which is the old."

In rushing, eager tenderness she browsed through one book after another, sometimes silently, sometimes with a little crooning quotation, where corners were turned down. And when she had quite finished, her eyes were like stars, and she looked up tremulously, and whispered:

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"Why, we—like—just—the—same—things."

But the Youngish Man did not smile back at her. His face in that second turned suddenly old-looking and haggard and gray. He threw the books back into their places, and slammed the trunk-cover with a bang.

For just the infinitesimal fraction of a second the Man and the Girl looked into each other's eyes. For just that infinitesimal fraction of a second the Man's eyes were as unfathomable as the Girl's.

Then with a great sniff and scratching and whine, the White Bulldog pushed his way into the room, and the Girl jumped up in alarm to note that the sun was dropping very low in the west, and that the shadows of late afternoon crept palpably over her companion's face.

For a moment the two stood awkwardly without a word, and then the Girl with a conscious effort at lightness queried:

"But *where* did the Runaway Road go to? I *must* find out."

The Youngish Man turned as though something had startled him.

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"Wouldn't you rather leave things just as they are?" he asked.

"NO!" The Girl stamped her foot vehemently. "NO! I want everything. I want the whole adventure."

"The whole adventure?" The Youngish Man winced at the phrase, and then laughed to cover his seriousness.

"All right," he acquiesced. "I'll show you just where the Runaway Road goes to."

Without further explanation he stepped to the dooryard and scooped up two heaping handfuls of gravel from the Road. As he came back into the room he trailed a little line of earth across the floor to the foot of the stairs, and threw the remaining handful up the steps just as a heedless child might have done.

"Go follow your Runaway Road," he smiled, "and see where it leads to, if you are so eager! I'm going down to the woods to see if my brother is quite lost in his clouds."

Wasn't that *another* dare? It seemed a craven thing to tease for a climax and then shirk it. She had never shirked anything yet that was right, no matter how unusual it was.

She started for the stairs. One step, two steps, three steps, four steps—her riding-boots grated on the gravel. "Oh, you funny Runaway Road," she trembled, "where *do* you go to?"

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At the top stairs a tiny waft of earth turned her definitely into the first doorway.

She took one step across the threshold, and then stood stock-still and stared. It was a *woman's*

room. And from floor to ceiling and from wall to wall flaunted an incongruous, moneyed effort to blot out all temperament and pang and trenchant life-history from one spot at least of the little old gray farmhouse. Bauble was there, and fashion and novelty, but the whole gay decoration looked and felt like the sumptuous dressing of a child whom one *hated*.

With a gasp of surprise the Girl went over and looked at herself in the mirror.

"Wouldn't I look queer in a room like this?" she whispered to herself. But she didn't look queer at all. She only felt queer, like a flatted note.

Then she hurried right down the stairs again, and went out in the yard, and caught the White Pony, and climbed up into her saddle.

The Youngish Man came running to say good-by.

"Well?" he said.

The Girl's eyes were steady as her hand. If her heart fluttered there was no sign of it.

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"Why, it was a *woman's* room," she answered to his inflection.

"Yes," said the Youngish Man quite simply. "It is my wife's room. My wife is in Europe getting her winter clothes. All people do not happen—to—like—the—same—things."

The Girl put out her hand to him with bright-faced friendliness.

"In Europe?" she repeated. "Indeed, I shall not be so local when I think of her. Wherever she is—all the time—I shall always think of your wife as being—most of anything else—in *luck*."

She drew back her hand and chirruped to the White Pony, but the Youngish Man detained her.

"Wait a second," he begged. "Here's a copy of Matthew Arnold for you to take home as a token, though there's only one thing in it for us, and you won't care for that until you are forty. You can play it's about the mountains that you pass going home. Here it is:

"Unaffrighted by the silence round them,
Undistracted by the sights they see,
THESE demand not that the things about them
Yield them love, amusement, sympathy."

"Rather cracked-ice comfort, isn't it?" the Girl laughed as she tucked the little book into her blouse.

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"Rather," said the Youngish Man, "but cracked ice is good for fevers, and Youth is the most raging fever that I know about."

Then he stood back from the White Pony, and smiled quizzically, and the Girl turned the White Pony's head, and started down the Road.

Just before the first curve in the alders, she whirled in her saddle and looked back. The Youngish Man was still standing there watching her, and she held up her hand as a final signal. Then the Road curved her out of sight.

It was chilly now in the gloaming shade of the woods, and home seemed a long way off. After a mile or two the White Pony dragged as though his feet were sore, and when she tried to force him into a jarring canter the sharp corners of the Matthew Arnold book goaded cruelly against her breast.

"It isn't going to be a very pleasant ride," she said. "But it was quite an adventure. I don't know whether to call it the 'Adventure of the Runaway Road' or the 'Adventure of the Little Perfect Hour.'"

Then she shivered a little and tried to keep the White Pony in the rapidly fading sun spots of the Road, but the shadows grew thicker and cracklier and more lonesome every minute, and the only familiar sound of life to be heard was 'way off in the distance, where some little lost bossy was calling plaintively for its mother.

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There were plenty of unfamiliar sounds, though. Things—nothing special, but just Things—sighed mournfully from behind a looming boulder. Something dark, with gleaming eyes, scudded madly through the woods. A ghastly, mawkish chill like tomb-air blew dankly from the swamp. Myriads of tiny insects droned venomously. The White Pony shied at a flash of heat lightning, and stumbled bunglingly on a rolling stone. Worst of all, far behind her, sounded the unmistakable tagging step of some stealthy creature.

For the first time in her life the girl was frightened—hideously, sickeningly frightened of Night!

Back in the open clearing round the tiny farmhouse, the light, of course, still lingered in a lulling yellow-gray. It would be an hour yet, she reasoned, before the great, black loneliness settled there. She could picture the little, simple, homely, companionable activities of early evening—the sputter of a candle, the good smell of a pipe, the steamy murmur of a boiling kettle. O—h! But could one go back wildly and say: "It is darker and cracklier than I supposed in the woods, and I am a wilful Girl, and there are fifteen wilful miles between me and home—and there is a cemetery on the way, and a new grave—and a squalid camp of gypsies—and a broken bridge

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—and I am afraid! What shall I do?"

She laughed aloud at the absurdity, and cut at the White Pony sharply with her whip. It would be lighter, she thought, on the open village road below the hill.

Love? Amusement? Sympathy? She shook her young fist defiantly at the hulking contour of a stolid, bored old mountain that loomed up through a gap in the trees. "*Drat* Self-sufficiency," she cursed, with a vehement little-girl curse. "I won't be a bored old Mountain. I *won't!* I *won't!* I *won't!*"

All her short, eager life, it seemed, she had been floundering like a stranger in a strange land—no father or mother, no chum, no friend, no lover, no anything—and now just for a flash, just for one "little, perfect hour" she had found a voice at last that *spoke her own language*, and the voice belonged to a Man who belonged to another woman!

She remembered her morning's singing with a bitter pang. "*Nothing* is mine forever. Nothing, *nothing*, NOTHING!" she sobbed.

A great, black, smothering isolation like a pall settled down over her, and seemed to pin itself with a stab through her heart. Everybody, once in his time, has tried to imagine his Dearest-one absolutely nonexistent, unborn, and tortured himself with the possibility of such a ghostly vacuum in his life. To the Girl suddenly it seemed as though puzzled, lonely, unmated, all her short years, she had stumbled now precipitously on the Great Cause Of It—a *vacuum*. It was not that she had lost any one, or missed any one. *It was simply that some one had never been born!*

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The thought filled her with a whimsical new terror. She pounded the White Pony into a gallop and covered the last half-mile of the Runaway Road. At the crest of the hill the valley vista brightened palely and the White Pony gave a whimper of awakened home instinct. Cautiously, warily, with legs folding like a jack-knife he began the hazardous descent.

Was he sleepy? Was he clumsy? Was he footsore? Just before the Runaway Road smoothed out into the village highway his knees wilted suddenly under him, and he pitched headlong with a hideous lurch that sent the Girl hurtling over his neck into a pitiful, cluttered heap among the dust and stones, where he came back after his first panicky run, and blew over her with dilated nostrils, and whimpered a little before he strayed off to a clover patch on the highway below.

Twilight deepened to darkness. Darkness quickened at last to stars. It was Night, real Night, black alike in meadow, wood, and dooryard, before the Girl opened her eyes again. Part of an orange moon, waning, wasted, decadent, glowed dully in the sky.

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For a long time, stark-still and numb, she lay staring up into space, conscious of nothing except consciousness. It was a floaty sort of feeling. Was she dead? That was the first thought that twittered in her brain. Gradually, though, the reassuring edges of her cheeks loomed into sight, and a beautiful, real pain racked along her spine and through her side. It was the pain that whetted her curiosity. "If it's my neck that's broken," she reasoned, "it's all over. If it's my heart it's only just begun."

Then she wriggled one hand very cautiously, and a White Doggish Something came over and licked her fingers. It felt very kind and refreshing.

Now and then on the road below, a carriage rattled by, or one voice called to another. She didn't exactly care that no one noticed her, or rescued her—indeed, she was perfectly, sluggishly comfortable—but she remembered with alarming distinctness that once, on a scorching city pavement, she had gone right by a bruised purple pansy that lay wilting underfoot. She could remember just how it looked. It had a funny little face, purple and yellow, and all twisted with pain. And she had gone right by. And she felt very sorry about it now.

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She was still thinking about that purple pansy an hour later, when she heard the screeching toot of an automobile, the snort of a horse, and the terrified clatter of hoofs up the hill. Then the White Doggish Something leaped up and barked a sharp, fluttery bark like a signal.

The next thing she knew, pleasant voices and a lantern were coming toward her. "They will be frightened," she thought, "to find a body in the Road." So, "Coo-o! Coo-o!" she cried in a faint little voice.

Then quickly a bright light poured into her face, and she swallowed very hard with her eyes for a whole minute before she could see that two men were bending over her. One of the men was just a man, but the other one was the Boy From Home. As soon as she saw him she began to cry very softly to herself, and the Boy From Home took her right up in his great, strong arms and carried her down to the cushioned comfort of the automobile.

"Where—did—you—come—from?" she whispered smotheringly into his shoulder.

The harried, boyish face broke brightly into a smile.

"I came from Rosedale to-night, to find *you!*" he said. "But they sent me up here on business to survey a new Road."

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"To survey a new Road?" she gasped. "That's—good. All the Roads that I know—go—to—Other People's Homes."

Her head began to droop limply to one side. She felt her senses reeling away from her again.

"If—I—loved—you," she hurried to ask, "would—you—make—me—a—safe Road—*all my own*?"

The Boy From Home gave a scathing glance at the hill that reared like a crag out of the darkness.

"If I couldn't make a safer Road than *that*—" he began, then stopped abruptly, with a sudden flash of illumination, and brushed his trembling lips across her hair.

"I'll make you the safest, smoothest Road that ever happened," he said, "if I have to dig it with my fingers and gnaw it with my teeth."

A little, snuggling sigh of contentment slipped from the Girl's lips.

"Do—you—suppose," she whispered, "do—you—suppose—that—after—all—*this*—was—the real—end—of—the Runaway Road?"

SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED IN OCTOBER

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ONDAY, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, it had rained. Day in, day out, day in, day out, day in, it had rained and rained and rained and rained and rained, till by Friday night the great blue mountains loomed like a chunk of ruined velvet, and the fog along the valley lay thick and gross as mildewed porridge.

It was a horrid storm. Slop and shiver and rotting leaves were rampant. Even in Alrik's snug little house the chairs were wetter than moss. Clothes in the closets hung lank and clammy as undried bathing-suits. Worst of all, across every mirror lay a breathy, sad gray mist, as though ghosts had been back to whimper there over their lost faces.

It had never been so before in the first week of October.

There were seven of us who used to tryst there together every year in the gorgeous Scotch-plaid Autumn, when the reds and greens and blues and browns and yellows lapped and overlapped like a festive little kilt for the Young Winter, and every crisp, sweet day that dawned was like the taste of cider and the smell of grapes.

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That is the kind of October well worth living, and seven people make a wonderfully proper number to play together in the country, particularly if six of you are men and women, and one of you is a dog.

Yet, after all, it was October, and October alone, that lured us. We certainly differed astonishingly in most of our other tastes.

Three of us belonged to the peaceful Maine woods—Alrik and Alrik's Wife and his Growly-Dog-Gruff. Four of us came from the rackets cities—the Partridge Hunter, the Blue Serge Man, the Pretty Lady, and Myself—a newspaper woman.

Incidentally, I may add that the Blue Serge Man and the Pretty Lady were husband and wife, but did not care much about it, having been married, very evidently, in some gorgeously ornate silver-plated emotion that they had mistaken at the time for the "sterling" article. The shine and beauty of the marriage had long since worn away, leaving things quite a little bit edgy here and there. Alrik's young spouse was, wonder of wonders, a transplanted New York chorus girl. No other biographical data are necessary except that Growly-Dog-Gruff was a brawling, black, fat-faced mongrel whose complete sense of humor had been slammed in the door at a very early age. For some inexplicable reason, he seemed to hold all the rest of the crowd responsible for the catastrophe, but was wildly devoted to me. He showed this devotion by never biting me as hard as he bit the others.

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Yet even with Growly-Dog-Gruff included among our assets, we had always considered ourselves an extremely superior crowd.

There were seven of us, I said, who *used* to tryst there together every autumn. But now, since the year before, three of us had *gone*, Alrik's Wife, Alrik's Dog, and the Blue Serge Man. So the four of us who remained huddled very close around the fire on that stormy, dreary, ghastly first night of our reunion, and talked-talked-talked and laughed-laughed-laughed just as fast as we possibly could for fear that a moment's silence would plunge us all down, whether or no, into the sorrow-chasm that lurked so consciously on every side. Yet we certainly looked and acted like a very jovial quartet.

The Pretty Lady, to be sure, was a black wisp of crape in her prim, four-footed chair; but Alrik's huge bulk tipped jauntily back against the wainscoting in a gaudy-colored Mackinaw suit, with merely a broad band of black across his left sleeve—as one who, neither affirming nor denying the formalities of grief, would laconically warn the public at large to "Keep Off My Sorrow." I liked Alrik, and I had liked Alrik's Wife. But I had loved Alrik's Dog. I do not care especially for temper in women, but a surly dog, or a surly man, is as irresistibly funny to me as Chinese music,

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there is so little plot to any of them.



The four of us who remained huddled very close around the fire

But now on the hearth-rug at my feet the Partridge Hunter lay in amiable corduroy comfort, with the little puff of his pipe and his lips throbbing out in pleasant, dozy regularity. He had traveled in Japan since last we met, and one's blood flowed pink and gold and purple, one's flesh turned silk, one's eyes onyx, before the wonder of his narrative.

No one was to be outdone in adventurous recital. Alrik had spent the summer guiding a party of amateur sports along the Allagash, and his garbled account of it would have stocked a comic paper for a month. The Pretty Lady had christened a warship, and her eager, brooky voice went rippling and churling through such major details as blue chiffon velvet and the goldiest kind of champagne. Even Alrik's raw-boned Old Mother, clinking dirty supper dishes out in the kitchen, had a crackle-voiced tale of excitement to contribute about a floundering spring bear that she had soused with soap-suds from her woodshed window. [165]

But all the time the storm grew worse and worse. The poor, tiny old house tore and writhed under the strain. Now and again a shutter blew shrilly loose, or a chimney brick thudded down, or a great sheet of rain sucked itself up like a whirlpool and then came drenching and hurtling itself in a perfect frenzy against the frail, clattering window-panes.

It was a good night for four friends to be housed together in a red, red room, where the low ceiling brooded over you like a face and the warped floor curled around you like the cuddle of a hand. A living-room should always be red, I think, like the walls of a heart, and cluttered, as Alrik's was, with every possible object, mean or fine, funny or pathetic, that typifies the owner's personal experience.

Yet there are people, I suppose, people stuffed with arts, not hearts, who would have monotoned Alrik's bright walls a dull brain-gray, ripped down the furs, the fishing-tackle, the stuffed owls, the gaudy theatrical posters, the shelf of glasses, the spooky hair wreaths, the really terrible crayon portrait of some much-beloved ancient grandame; and, supplementing it all with a single, homesick Japanese print, yearning across the vacuum at a chalky white bust of a perfect stranger like Psyche or Ruskin, would have called the whole effect more "successful." Just as though the crudest possible room that represents the affections is not infinitely more worth while than the most esoteric apartment that represents the intellect. [166]

There were certainly no vacuums in Alrik's room. Everything in it was crowded and scrunched together like a hard, friendly hand-shake. It was the most fiercely, primitively sincere room that I have ever seen, and king or peasant therefore would have felt equally at home in it. Surely no mere man could have crossed the humpy threshold without a blissful, instinctive desire to keep on his hat and take off his boots. Alrik knew how to make a room "homeful." Alrik knew everything in the world except grammar.

Red warmth, yellow cheer, and all-colored jollity were there with us.

Faster and faster we talked, and louder and louder we laughed, until at last, when the conversation lost its breath utterly, Alrik jumped up with a grin and started our old friend the phonograph. His first choice of music was a grotesque *duo* by two back-yard cats. It was one of those irresistibly silly minstrel things that would have exploded any decent bishop in the midst of his sermon. Certainly no one of us had ever yet been able to withstand it. *But now no bristling, injured dog jumped from his sleep and charged like a whole regiment on the perfectly innocent garden.* And the duo somehow seemed strangely flat. [167]

"Here is something we used to like," suggested Alrik desperately, and started a splendid barytone rendering of "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes." *But no high-pitched, mocking tenor voice took up the solemn velvet song and flirted it like a cheap chiffon scarf.* And the Pretty Lady

rose very suddenly and went out to the kitchen indefinitely "for a glass of water." It was funny about the Blue Serge Man. I had not liked him overmuch, but I missed *not-liking-him* with a crick in my heart that was almost sorrow.

"Oh, for heaven's sake try some other music!" cried the Partridge Hunter venomously, and Alrik clutched out wildly for the first thing he could reach. It was "Give My Regards to Broadway." We had practically worn out the record the year before, but its mutilated remains whirred along, dropping an occasional note or word, with the same cheerful spunk and unconcern that characterized the song itself:

"Give my regards to Broadway,
Remember me to Herald Square,
Tell all the—whirry—whirry, whirrrrry—whirrrrrr
That I will soon be there."

The Partridge Hunter began instantly to beat muffled time with his soft felt slippers. Alrik plunged as usual into a fearfully clever and clattery imitation of an ox shying at a street-car. *But what of it? No wakened, sparkling-eyed girl came stealing forth from her corner to cuddle her blazing cheek against the cool, brass-colored jowl of the phonograph horn.* An All-Goneness is an amazing thing. It was strange about Alrik's Wife. Her presence had been as negative as a dead gray dove. But her *absence* was like scarlet strung with bells!

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The evening began to drag out like a tortured rubber band getting ready to snap.

It was surely eleven o'clock before the Pretty Lady returned from the kitchen with our hot lemonades. The tall glasses jingled together pleasantly on the tray. The height was there, the breadth, the precious, steaming fragrance. *But the Blue Serge Man had always mixed our nightcaps for us.*

With grandiloquent pleasantry, the Partridge Hunter jumped to his feet, raised his glass, toasted "Happy Days," choked on the first swallow, bungled his grasp, and dropped the whole glass in shattering, messy fragments to the floor.

"Lord," he muttered under his breath, "one could stand missing a fellow in a church or a graveyard or a mournful sunset glow—but to miss him in a foolish, folksy—hot lemonade!—Lord!" And he shook his shoulders almost angrily and threw himself down again on the hearth-rug.

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The darkening room was warm as an oven now, and the great, soft, glowing pile of apple-wood embers lured one's drowsy eyes like a flame-colored pillow. No one spoke at all until midnight.

But the clock had only just finished complaining about the hour when the Partridge Hunter straightened up abruptly and cried out to no one in particular:

"Well, I simply can't bluff this out any longer. I've just *got* to know how it all happened!"

No one stopped to question his meaning. No one stopped to parry with word or phrase. Like two tense music-boxes wound to their utmost resonance, but with mechanism only just that instant released, Alrik and the Pretty Lady burst into sound.

The Pretty Lady spoke first. Her breath was short and raspy and cross, like the breath of a person who runs for a train—and misses it.

"It was—in—Florida," she gasped, "the—last—of March. The sailboat was a dreadful, flimsy, shattered thing. But he *would* go out in it—*alone*—storm or no storm!" She spoke with a sudden sense of emotional importance, with a certain strange, fierce, new pride in the shortcomings of her Man. "He must have swamped within an hour. They found his boat. But they never found his body. Just as one could always find his pocket, but never his watch—his purse, but never his money—his song, but never his soul." Her broken self-control plunged deeper and deeper into bitterness. "It was a stupid—wicked—wilful—accident," she persisted, "and I can see him in his last, smothery—astonished—moment—just—as—as—plainly—as—though—I—had—been—there. Do you think for an instant that he would swallow even—Death—without making a fuss about it? Can't you hear him rage and sputter: '*This* is too salt! *This* is too cold! Take it away and bring me another!' While all the time his frenzied mind was racing up and down some precious, memoried playground like the Harvard Stadium or the New York Hippodrome, whimpering, 'Everybody'll be there except—*me*—except M-E!'"

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The Pretty Lady's voice took on a sudden hurt, left-out resentment. "Of course," she hurried on, "he wasn't exactly sad to go—nothing could make him sad. But I know that it must have made him very *mad*. He had just bought a new automobile. And he had rented a summer place at Marblehead. And he wanted to play tennis in June—"

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She paused for an instant's breath, and Alrik crashed like a moose into the silence.

"It was lung trouble!" he attested vehemently. "Cough, cough, cough, all the time. It came on specially worse in April, and she died in May. She wasn't never very strong, you know, but she'd been brought up in your wicked old steam-heated New York, and she would persist in wearing tissue-paper clothes right through our rotten icy winters up here. And when I tried to dose her like the doctor said, with cod-liver oil or any of them thick things, I couldn't fool her—she just up an' said it was nothin' but liquid flannel, and spit it out and sassed me. And Gruff—Growly-Dog-Gruff," he finished hastily, "I don't know what ailed him. He jus' kind of followed along about

June."

The Partridge Hunter drew a long, heavy breath. When he spoke at last, his voice sounded like the voice of a man who holds his hat in his hand, and the puffs of smoke from his pipe made a sort of little halo round his words.

"Isn't it nice," he mused, "to think that while we four are cozying here to-night in the same jolly old haunts, perhaps they three—Man, Girl, and Dog—are cuddling off together somewhere in the big, spooky Unknown, in the shade of a cloud, or the shine of a star—talking—perhaps—about—*us?*"

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The whimsical comfort of the thought pleased me. I did not want any one to be alone on such a night.

But Alrik's tilted chair came crashing down on the floor with a resounding whack. His eyes were blazing.

"She *ain't* with him!" he cried. "She *ain't*, she *AIN'T*, she *A-I-N-'T!* I won't have it. Why, it's the middle of the night!"

And in that electric instant I saw the Pretty Lady's face set rigidly, all except her mouth, which twisted in my direction.

"I'll wager she *is* with him," she whispered under her breath. "She always did tag him wherever he went!"

Then I felt the toe of my slipper meet the recumbent elbow of the Partridge Hunter. Had I reached out to him? Or had he reached back to me? There was no time to find out, for the smooth, round conversation shattered prickingly in the hand like a blown-glass bauble, and with much nervous laughter and far-fetched joke-making, we rose, rummaged round for our candles, and climbed upstairs to bed.

Alrik's Old Mother burrowed into a corner under the eaves.

The Pretty Lady had her usual room, and mine was next to hers. For a lingering moment I dallied with her, craving some tiny, absurd bit of loving service. First, I helped her with a balky hook on her collar. Then I started to put her traveling coat and hat away in the closet. On the upper shelf something a little bit scary brushed my hands. *It was the Blue Serge Man's cap, with a ragged gash across it where Growly-Dog-Gruff had worried it on a day I remembered well.* With a hurried glance over my shoulder to make sure that the Pretty Lady had not also spied it, I reached up and shoved it—oh, 'way, 'way back out of sight, where no one but a detective or a lover could possibly find it.

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Then I hurried off to my room with a most garish human wonder: How could a *man* be all gone, but his silly cap *last?*

My little room was just as I remembered it, bare, bleak, and gruesomely clean, with a rag rug, a worsted motto, and a pink china vase for really sensuous ornamentation. I opened the cheap pine bureau to stow away my things. *A trinket jingled—a tawdry rhinestone side-comb. Caught in the setting was a tiny wisp of brown hair.* I slammed the drawer with a bang, and opened another. *Metal and leather slid heavily along the bottom.* It might have been my beast's collar, if distinctly across the name-plate had not run the terse phrase "Alrik's Cross Dog." I did not like to have my bureau haunted! When I slammed that drawer, it cracked the looking-glass.

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Then, with candle burning just as cheerfully as possible, I lay down on the bed in all my clothes and began to *wake up*—wider and wider and wider.

My reason lay quite dormant like some drugged thing but my memory, photographic as a lens, began to reproduce the ruddy, blond face of the Blue Serge Man beaming across a chafing-dish; the mournful, sobbing sound of a dog's dream; the crisp, starched, Monday smell of the blue gingham aprons that Alrik's Wife used to wear. The vision was altogether too vivid to be pleasant.

Then the wet wind blew in through the window like a splash of alcohol, chilling, revivifying, stinging as a whip-lash. The tormented candle flame struggled furiously for a moment, and went out, hurtling the black night down upon me like some choking avalanche of horror. In utter idiotic panic I jumped from my bed and clawed my way toward the feeble gray glow of the window-frame. The dark dooryard before me was drenched with rain. The tall linden trees waved and mourned in the wind.

"Of course, of course, there are no ghosts," I reasoned, just as one reasons that there is no mistake in the dictionary, no flaw in the multiplication table. But sometimes one's fantastically jaded nerves think they have found the blunder in language, the fault in science. Ghosts or no ghosts—if you *thought* you saw one, wouldn't it be just as bad? My eyes strained out into the darkness. Suppose—I—should—*think*—that I heard the bark of a dog? Suppose—suppose—that from that black shed door where the automobile used to live, I should *think*—even *T-H-I-N-K* that I saw the Blue Serge Man come stumbling with a lantern? The black shed door burst open with a bang-bang-bang, and I screamed, jumped, snatched a blanket, and fled for the lamp-lighted hall.

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A little dazzled by the sudden glow, I shrank back in alarm from a figure on the top stair. It was the Pretty Lady. Wrapped clumsily like myself in a big blanket, she sat huddled there with the kerosene lamp close beside her, mending the Blue Serge Man's cap. On the step below her,

smothered in a soggy lavender comforter, crouched Alrik's Old Mother, her dim eyes brightened uncannily with superstitious excitement. I was evidently a welcome addition to the party, and the old woman cuddled me in like a meal-sack beside her.

"Naw one could sleep a night like this," she croaked.

"*Sleep?*" gasped the Pretty Lady. Scorn infinite was in her tone.

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But comfortably and serenely from the end of the hall came the heavy, regular breathing of the Partridge Hunter, and from beyond that, Alrik's blissful, oblivious snore. Yet Alrik was the only one among us who claimed an agonizing, personal sorrow.

I began to laugh a bit hysterically. "Men are funny people," I volunteered.

Alrik's Old Mother caught my hand with a chuckle, then sobered suddenly, and shook her wadded head.

"Men *ain't* exactly—people," she confided. "Men *ain't* exactly people—at all!"

The conviction evidently burned dull, steady, comforting as a night-light, in the old crone's eighty years' experience, but the Pretty Lady's face grabbed the new idea desperately, as though she were trying to rekindle happiness with a wet match. Yet every time her fretted lips straightened out in some semblance of Peace, her whole head would suddenly explode in one gigantic sneeze. There was no other sound, I remember, for hours and hours, except the steady, monotonous, slobbery swash of a bursting roof-gutter somewhere close in the eaves.

Certainly Dawn itself was not more chilled and gray than we when we crept back at last to our beds, thick-eyed with drowsy exhaustion, limp-bodied, muffle-minded.

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But when we woke again, the late, hot noonday sun was like a scorching fire in our faces, and the drenched dooryard steamed like a dye-house in the sudden burst of unseasonable heat.

After breakfast, the Pretty Lady, in her hundred-dollar ruffles, went out to the barn with shabby Alrik to help him mend a musty old plow harness. The Pretty Lady's brains were almost entirely in her fingers. So were Alrik's. The exclusiveness of their task seemed therefore to thrust the Partridge Hunter and me off by ourselves into a sort of amateur sorrow class, and we started forth as cheerfully as we could to investigate the autumn woods.

Passing the barn door, we heard the strident sound of Alrik's complaining. Braced with his heavy shoulders against a corner of the stall, he stood hurling down his new-born theology upon the glossy blond head of the Pretty Lady who sat perched adroitly on a nail keg with two shiny-tipped fingers prying up the corners of her mouth into a smile. One side of the smile was distinctly wry. But Alrik's face was deadly earnest. Sweat bubbled out on his forehead like tears that could not possibly wait to reach his eyes.

"There ought to be a separate heaven for ladies and gentlemen," he was arguing frantically. "'Tain't fair. 'Tain't right. I won't have it! I'll see a priest. I'll find a parson. If it ain't proper to live with people, it ain't proper to die with 'em. I tell you I won't have Amy careerin' round with strange men. She always was foolish about men. And I'm breakin' my heart for her, and Mother's gettin' old, and the house is goin' to rack and ruin, but how—*how* can a man go and get married comfortable again when his mind's all torturin' round and round and round about his first wife?"

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The Partridge Hunter gave a sharp laugh under his breath, yet he did not seem exactly amused. "Laugh for *two*!" I suggested, as we dodged out of sight round the corner and plunged off into the actual Outdoors.

The heat was really intense, the October sun dazzlingly bright. Warmth steamed from the earth, and burnished from the sky. A plushy brown rabbit lolling across the roadway dragged on one's sweating senses like overshoes in June. Under our ruthless, heavy-booted feet the wet green meadow winced like some tender young salad. At the edge of the forest the big pines darkened sumptuously. Then, suddenly, between a scarlet sumach and a slim white birch, the cavernous wood-path opened forth mysteriously, narrow and tall and domed like the arch of a cathedral. Not a bird twitted, not a leaf rustled, and, far as the eye could reach, the wet brown pine-needles lay thick and soft and padded like tan-bark, as though all Nature waited hushed and expectant for some exquisitely infinitesimal tragedy, like the travail of a squirrel.

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With brain and body all a-whisper and a-tiptoe, the Partridge Hunter and I stole deeper and deeper into the Color and the Silence and the Witchery, dazed at every step by the material proof of autumn warring against the spiritual insistence of spring. It was the sort of day to make one very tender toward the living just because they were living, and very tender toward the dead just because they were dead.

At the gurgling bowl of a half-hidden spring, we made our first stopping-place. Out of his generous corduroy pockets the Partridge Hunter tinkled two drinking-cups, dipped them deep in the icy water, and handed me one with a little shuddering exclamation of cold. For an instant his eyes searched mine, then he lifted his cup very high and stared off into *Nothingness*.

"To the—*All-Gone People*," he toasted.

I began to cry. He seemed very glad to have me cry. "Cry for two," he suggested blithely, "cry for two," and threw himself down on the twiggy ground and began to snap metallically against

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the cup in his hand.

"Nice little tin cup," he affirmed judicially. "The Blue Serge Man gave it to me. It must have cost as much as fifteen cents. And it will last, I suppose, till the moon is mud and the stars are dough. But the Blue Serge Man himself is—quite *gone*. Funny idea!" The Partridge Hunter's forehead began to knit into a fearful frown. "Of course it *isn't* so," he argued, "but it would certainly seem sometimes as though a man's *things* were the only really immortal, indestructible part of him, and that Soul was nothing in the world but just a composite name for the S-ouvenirs, O-rnaments, U-tensils, L-itter that each man's personality accumulates in the few years' time allotted to him. The man himself, you see, is wiped right off the earth like a chalk-mark, but you can't escape or elude in a million years the wizened bronze elephant that he brought home from India, or the showy red necktie that's down behind his bureau, or the floating, wind-blown, ash-barrel bill for violets that turns up a generation hence in a German prayer-book at a French book-stall.

"And isn't Death a teasing teacher? Holds up a personality suddenly like a map—makes you learn by heart every possible, conceivable pleasant detail concerning that personality, and then, when you are fairly bursting with your happy knowledge, tears up the map in your face and says, 'There's no such country any more, so what you've learned won't do you the slightest good.' And there you'd only just that moment found out that your friend's hair was a beautiful auburn instead of 'a horrid red'; that his blessed old voice was hearty, not 'noisy'; that his table manners were quaint, not 'queer'; that his morals were broad, not 'bad.'" [181]

The Partridge Hunter's mouth began to twist. "It's a horrid thing to say," he stammered, "but there ought to be a sample shroud in every home, so that when your husband is late to dinner, or your daughter smokes a cigarette, or your son decides to marry the cook, you could get out the shroud and try it on the offender, and make a few experiments concerning—well, *values*. Why, I saw a man last week dragged by a train—jerked in and out and over and under, with his head or his heels or the hem of his coat just missing Death every second by the hundred-millionth fraction of an inch. But when he was rescued at last and went home to dinner—shaken as an aspen, sicker than pulp, tongue-tied like a padlock—I suppose, very likely, his wife scolded him for having forgotten the oysters."

The Partridge Hunter's face flushed suddenly. [182]

"I didn't care much for Alrik's Wife," he attested abruptly. "I always thought she was a trivial, foolish little crittur. But if I had known that I was never going to see her again—while the sun blazed or the stars blinked—I should like to have gone back from the buckboard that last morning and stroked her brown hair just once away from her eyes. Does that seem silly to you?"

"Why, no," I said. "It doesn't seem silly at all. If I had guessed that the Blue Serge Man was going off on such a long, long, never-stop journey, I might even have kissed him good-by. But I certainly can't imagine anything that would have provoked or astonished him more! People can't go round petting one another just on the possible chance of never meeting again. And goodness gracious! nobody wants to. It's only that when a person actually *dies*, a sort of subtle, holy sense in you wakes up and wishes that just once for all eternity it might have gotten a signal through to that subtle, holy sense in the other person. And of course when a youngster dies, you feel somehow that he or she must have been different all along from other people, and you simply wish that you might have guessed that fact sooner—before it was too late."

The Partridge Hunter began to smile. "If you knew," he teased, "that I was going to be massacred by an automobile or crumpled by an elevator before next October—would you wish that you had petted me just a little to-day?" [183]

"Yes," I acknowledged.

The Partridge Hunter pretended he was deaf. "Say that once again," he begged.

"Y-e-s," I repeated.

The Partridge Hunter put back his head and roared. "That's just about like kissing through the telephone," he said. "It isn't particularly satisfying, and yet it makes a desperately cunning sound."

Then I put back my head and laughed, too, because it is so thoroughly comfortable and pleasant to be friends for only one single week in all the year. Independence is at best such a scant fabric, and every new friendship you incur takes just one more tuck in that fabric, till before you know it your freedom is quite too short to go out in. The Partridge Hunter felt exactly the same way about it, and after each little October playtime we ripped out the thread with never a scar to show.

Even now while we laughed, we thought we might as well laugh at everything we could think of, and get just that much finished and out of the way.

"Perhaps," said the Partridge Hunter, "perhaps the Blue Serge Man was *glad* to see Amy, and perhaps he was rattled, no one can tell. But I'll wager anything he was awfully mad to see Gruff. There were lots of meteors last June, I remember. I understand now. It was the Blue Serge Man raking down the stars to pelt at Gruff." [184]

"Gruff was a very—nice dog," I insisted.

"He was a very growly dog," acceded the Partridge Hunter.

"If you growl all the time, it's almost the same as a purr," I argued.

The Partridge Hunter smiled a little, but not very generously. Something was on his mind. "Poor little Amy," he said. "Any man-and-woman game is playing with fire, but it's foolish to think that there are only two kinds, just Hearth-Fire and Hell-Fire. Why, there's 'Student-lamp' and 'Cook-stove' and 'Footlights.' Amy and the Blue Serge Man were playing with 'Footlights,' I guess. She needed an audience. And he was New York to her, great, blessed, shiny, racketsy New York. I believe she loved Alrik. He must have been a pretty picturesque figure on that first and only time when he blazed his trail down Broadway. But *happy* with him—H-E-R-E? Away from New York? Five years? In just green and brown woods where the posies grow on the ground instead of on hats, and even the Christmas trees are trimmed with nothing except real snow and live squirrels? G-L-O-R-Y! Of course her chest caved in. There wasn't kinky air enough in the whole state of Maine to keep her kind of lungs active. Of course she starved to death. She needed her meat flavored with harp and violin; her drink aerated with electric lights. We might have done something for her if we'd liked her just a little bit better. But I didn't even know her till I heard that she was dead."

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He jumped up suddenly and helped me to my feet. Something in my face must have stricken him. "Would you like my warm hand to walk home with?" he finished quite abruptly.

Even as he offered it, one of those chill, quick autumn changes came over the October woods. The sun grayed down behind huge, windy clouds. The leaves began to shiver and shudder and chatter, and all the gorgeous reds and greens dulled out of the world, leaving nothing as far as the eye could reach but dingy squirrel-colors, tawny grays and dusty yellows, with the far-off, panting sound of a frightened brook dodging zigzag through some meadow in a last, desperate effort to escape winter. As a draft from a tomb the cold, clammy, valley twilight was upon us.

Like two bashful children scuttling through a pantomime, we hurried out of the glowery, darkening woods, and then at the edge of the meadow broke into a wild, mirthful race for Alrik's bright hearth-fire, which glowed and beckoned from his windows like a little tame, domesticated sunset. The Partridge Hunter cleared the porch steps at a single bound, but I fell flat on the bruising doormat.

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Nothing really mattered, however, except the hearth-fire itself.

Alrik and the Pretty Lady were already there before us, kneeling down with giggly, scorching faces before a huge corn-popper foaming white with little muffled, ecstatic notes of heat and harvest.

The Pretty Lady turned a crimson cheek to us, and Alrik's tanned skin glowed like a freshly shellacked Indian. Even the Old Mother's asthmatic breath purred from the jogging rocker like a specially contented pussy-cat.

Nothing in all the room, I remember, looked pallid or fretted except the great, ghastly white face of the clock. I despise a clock that looks worried. It wasn't late, anyway. It was scarcely quarter-past four.

Indeed, it was only half-past four when the company came. We were making such a racket among ourselves that our very first warning was the sudden, blunt, rubbery *m-o-o* of an automobile directly outside. Mud was the first thing I thought of.

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Then the door flew open peremptorily, and there on the threshold stood the Blue Serge Man—not dank and wet with slime and seaweed, but fat and ruddy and warm in a huge gray 'possum coat. Only the fearful, stilted immovability of him gave the lie to his reality.

It was a miracle! I had always wondered a great deal about miracles. I had always longed, craved, prayed to experience a miracle. I had always supposed that a miracle was the supreme sensation of existence, the ultimate rapture of the soul. But it seems I was mistaken. A miracle doesn't do anything to your soul for days and days and days. Your heart, of course, may jump, and your blood foam, but first of all it simply makes you very, very sick in the pit of your stomach. It made a man like Alrik clutch at his belt and jump up and down and "holler" like a lunatic. It smote the Partridge Hunter somewhere between a cramp and a sob. It ripped the Old Mother close at her waist-line, and raveled her out on the floor like a fluff of gray yarn.

But the Pretty Lady just stood up with her hands full of pop-corn, and stared and stared and stared and STARED. From her shining blond head to her jet-black slippers she was like an exploded pulse.

The Blue Serge Man stepped forward into the room and faltered. In that instant's faltering, Alrik jumped for him like a great, glad, loving dog, and ripped the coat right off his shoulders.

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The Blue Serge Man's lips were all a-grin, but a scar across his forehead gave a certain tense, stricken dignity to his eyes. Very casually, very indolently, he began to tug at his gloves, staring all the while with malevolent joy on the fearful crayon portrait of the ancient grandame.

"That's the very last face I thought of when I was drowning," he drawled, "and there wasn't room enough in all heaven for the two of us. Bully old face, I'm glad I'm here. I've been in Cuba," he continued quite abruptly, "and I meant to play dead forever and ever. But there was an

autumn leaf—a red autumn leaf in a lady's hat—and it made me homesick." His voice broke suddenly, and he turned to his wife with quick, desperate, pleading intensity. "I'm not—much—good," he gasped. "But I've—*come back!*"

I saw the flaky white pop-corn go trickling through the Pretty Lady's fingers, but she just stood there and shook and writhed like a tightly wrung newspaper smoldering with fire. Then her face flamed suddenly with a light I had never, never seen since my world was made.

"I don't care whether you're any good or not," she cried. "You're alive! You're alive! You're alive! You're *alive!* You're—ALIVE!"

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I thought she would never stop saying it, on and on and on and on. "You're alive, you're alive, you're alive." Like a defective phonograph disk her shattered sense caught on that one supreme phrase, "You're alive! You're alive! You're alive! You're alive!"

Then the blood that had blazed in her face spread suddenly to her nerveless hands, and she began to pluck at the crape ruffles on her gown. Stitch by stitch I heard the rip-rip-rip like the buzz of a fishing-reel. But louder than all came that maddening, monotonous cry, "You're alive! You're alive! You're alive!" I thought her brain was broken.

Then the Blue Serge Man sprang toward her, and I shut my eyes. But I caught the blessed, clumsy sound of a lover's boot tripping on a ruffle—the crushing out of a breath—the smother of a half-lipped word.

I don't know what became of Alrik. I don't know what became of Alrik's Old Mother. But the Partridge Hunter, with his arm across his eyes, came groping for me through the red, red room.

"Let's get out of this," he whispered. "Let's get out of this."

So once again, amateurs both in sorrow and in gladness, the Partridge Hunter and I fled fast before the Incomprehensible. Out we ran through Amy's frost-blighted rose-garden, *where no gay, shrill young voice challenged our desecration*, out through the senile old apple orchard, *where no suspicious dog came bristling forth to question our innocent intrusion*, up through the green-ribbon roadway, up through the stumbling wood-path, to the safe, sound, tangible, moss-covered pasture-bars, where the warm, brown-fur bossies, sweet-breathed and steaming, came lolling gently down through the gauzy dusk to barter their pleasant milk for a snug night's lodging and a troughful of yellow mush.

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A dozen mysterious wood-folk crackled close within reach, as though all the little day-animals were laying aside their starched clothes for the night; and the whole earth teemed with the exquisite, sleepy, nestling-down sound of fur and feathers and tired leaves. Out in the forest depths somewhere a belated partridge drummed out his excuses. Across on the nearest stone wall a tawny marauder went hunching his way along. It might have been a fox, it might have been Amy's thrown-away coon-cat. Short and sharp from the house behind us came the fast, furious crash of Alrik's frenzied young energies, chopping wood enough to warm a dozen houses for a dozen winters for a dozen new brides. But high above even the racket of his ax rang the sweet, wild, triumphant resonance of some French Canadian *chanson*. His heart and his lungs seemed fairly to have exploded in relief.

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And over the little house, and the dark woods, and the mellow pasture, and the brown-fur bossies, broke a little, wee, tiny prick-point of a star, as though some Celestial Being were peeping down whimsically to see just what the Partridge Hunter and I thought of it all.

THE AMATEUR LOVER

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WITH every night piercing her like a new wound, and every morning stinging her like salt in that wound, Ruth Dudley's broken engagement had dragged itself out for four long, hideous months. There's so much fever in a woman's sorrow.

At first, to be sure, there had been no special outward and visible sign of heartbreak except the thunderstorm shadows under the girl's blue eyes. Then, gradually, very gradually, those same plucky eyes had dulled and sickened as though every individual thought in her brain was festering. Later, an occasional loosened finger ring had clattered off into her untouched plate or her reeking strong cup of coffee. At the end of the fourth month the family doctor was quite busy attesting that she had no tubercular trouble of any sort. There never yet was any stethoscope invented that could successfully locate consumption of the affections.

It was about this time that Ruth's Big Brother, strolling smokily into her room one evening, jumped back in tragic dismay at the astonishing sight that met his eyes. There, like some fierce young sacrificial priestess, with a very modern smutty nose and scorched cheeks, Ruth knelt on the hearth-rug, slamming every conceivable object that she could reach into the blazing fire. The soft green walls of the room were utterly stripped and ravished. The floor in every direction lay cluttered deep with books and pictures and clothes and innumerable small bits of bric-a-brac.

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Already the brimming fireplace leaked forth across the carpet in little gray, gusty flakes of ash and cinder.

The Big Brother hooted right out loud. "Why, Ruthy Dudley," he gasped. "What *are* you doing? You look like the devil!"

Blissfully unconscious of smoke or smut, the girl pushed back the straggling blond hair from her eyes and grinned, with her white teeth shot like a bolt through her under lip to keep the grin in place.

"I'm not a 'devil,'" she explained. "I'm a god! And what am I doing? I'm creating a new heaven and a new earth."

"You won't have much left to create it with," scoffed the Big Brother, kicking the tortured wreck of a straw hat farther back into the flames.

The girl reached up impatiently and smutted her other hand across her eyes. "Nothing left to create it with?" she mocked. "Why, if I had anything left to create it with, I'd be only a—mechanic!"

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Then, blackened like a coal-heaver and tousled like a Skye terrier, she picked up the scarlet bellows and commenced to pump a savage yellow flame into a writhing, half-charred bundle of letters.

Through all the sweet, calm hours of that warm June night the sacrifice progressed with amazing rapacity. By midnight she had just finished stirring the fire-tongs through the ghostly, lacelike ashes of her wedding gown. At two o'clock her violin went groaning into the flames. At three her Big Brother, yawning sleepily back in his nightclothes, picked her up bodily and dumped her into her bed. He was very angry. "Little Sister," he scolded, "there's no man living worth the fuss you're making over Aleck Reese!" And the little sister sat up and rubbed her smutty, scorched cheek against his cool, blue-shaven face as she tilted the drifting ashes from the bedspread. "I'm not making any 'fuss,'" she protested. "I'm only just—burning my bridges." It was the first direct allusion that she had ever made to her trouble.

Twice after that—between three o'clock and breakfast time—the Big Brother woke from his sleep with a horrid sense that the house was on fire. Twice between three o'clock and breakfast time he met the Housekeeper scuttling along the halls on the same sniffy errand. Once with a flickering candle-light Ruth herself crept out to the doorway and laughed at them. "The house isn't on fire, you sillies," she cried. "Don't you know a burnt bridge when you smell it?" But the doctor had said quite distinctly: "You must watch that little girl. Sorrow in the tongue will talk itself cured, if you give it a chance; but sorrow in the eyes has a wicked, wicked way now and then of leaking into the brain."

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It was the Housekeeper, though, whose eyes looked worried and tortured at breakfast time. It was the Big Brother's face that showed a bit sharp on the cheek-bones. Ruth herself, for the first time in a listless, uncollared, unbelted, unstarched month, came frisking down to the table as white and fresh and crisp as linen and starch and curls could make her.

"I'm going to town this morning," she announced nonchalantly to her relieved and delighted hearers. The eyes that turned to her brother's were almost mischievous. "Couldn't you meet me at twelve o'clock," she suggested, "and take me off to the shore somewhere for lunch? I'll be shopping on Main Street about that time, so suppose I meet you at Andrew Bernard's office."

Half an hour later she was stealing out of the creaky back door into the garden, along the gray, pebbly gravel walk between the tall tufts of crimson and purple phlox, to the little gay-faced plot of heart's-ease where the family doctor, symbolist and literalist, had bade her dig and delve every day in the good, hot, wholesome, freckly sunshine. Close by in the greensward an absurd pet lamb was tugging and bouncing at the end of its stingy tether. In a moment's time the girl had transferred the clumsy iron tether-stake to the midst of her posy bed. Then she started for the gate.

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Pausing for just one repentant second with her hand on the gate latch, she turned and looked back to the ruthlessly trodden spot where the bland-eyed lamb stood eyeing her quizzically with his soft, woolly mouth fairly dripping with the tender, precious blossoms. "Heart's-ease. B-a-a!" mocked the girl, with a flicker of real amusement. "Heart's-ease. B-a-a-a!" scoffed the lamb, just because his stomach and his tongue happened to be made like that. Then with a quick dodge across the lane she ran to meet the electric car and started off triumphantly for the city, shutting her faint eyes resolutely away from all the roadside pools and ponds and gleams of river whose molten, ultimate peace possibilities had lured her sick mind so incessantly for the past dozen weeks.

Two hours later, with a hectic spurt of energy, she was racing up three winding, dizzy flights of stairs in a ponderous, old-fashioned office building.

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Before a door marked "Andrew Bernard, Attorney at Law," she stopped and waited a frightened moment for breath and courage. As though the pounding of her heart had really sounded as loud as it felt, the door handle turned abruptly, and a very tall, broad-shouldered, grave-faced young man greeted her with attractive astonishment.

"Good morning, Drew," she began politely. "Why, I haven't seen you for a year." Then, with

alarming vehemence, she finished: "Are you all alone? I want to talk with you."

Her breathlessness, her embarrassment, her fragile intensity sobered the young man instantly as he led her into his private office and stood for a moment staring inquiringly into her white face. Her mouth was just as he had last seen it a year ago, fresh and whimsical and virginal as a child's; but her eyes were scorched and dazed like the eyes of a shipwreck survivor or any other person who has been forced unexpectedly to stare upon life's big emotions with the naked eye.

"I hear you've been ill this spring," he began gently. "If you wanted to talk with me, Ruthy, why didn't you let me come out to the house and see you? Wouldn't it have been easier?"

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She shook her head. "No," she protested, "I wanted to come here. What I've got to talk about is very awkward, and if things get too awkward—why, an embarrassed guest has so much better chance to escape than an embarrassed host." She struggled desperately to smile, but her lips twittered instead into a frightened quiver. With narrowing eyes the young man drew out his big leather chair for her. Then he perched himself on the corner of his desk and waited for her to speak.

"Ruthy dear," he smiled, "what's the trouble? Come, tell your old chum all about it."

The girl scrunched her eyes up tight, like a person who starts to jump and doesn't care where he lands. Twice her lips opened and shut without a sound. Then suddenly she braced herself with an intense effort.

"Drew," she blurted out, "do you remember—three years ago—you asked me to—marry—you?"

"Do I remember it?" gasped Drew. The edgy sharpness of his tone made the girl open her eyes and stare at him. "Yes," he acknowledged, "I remember it."

The girl began to smooth her white skirts with excessive precision across her knees. "What made you—ask me?" she whispered.

"What made me ask you?" cried the man.

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"What made me ask you? Why, I asked you because I love you."

The girl bent forward anxiously as though she were deaf. "You asked me because—*what?*" she quizzed him.

"Because I love you," he repeated.

She jumped up suddenly and ran across the room to him. "Because you—love me?" she reiterated. "'Love?' Not 'loved'? Not past tense? Not all over and done with?"

There was no mistaking her meaning. But the man's face did not kindle, except with pain. Almost roughly he put his hands on her shoulders and searched down deep into her eyes. "Ruth," he probed, "what are you trying to do to me? Open an old wound? You know I—love you."

The girl's mouth smiled, but her eyes blurred wet with fright and tears.

"Would you care anything—about—marrying me—now?" she faltered.

Drew's face blanched utterly, and the change gave him such a horridly foreign, alien look that the girl drew away from his hands and scuttled back to the big chair, and began all over again to smooth and smooth the garish white skirt across her knees. "Oh, Drew, Drew," she pleaded, "please look like—*you*. Please—please—don't look like anybody else."

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But Drew did not smile at her. He just stood there and stared in a puzzled, tortured sort of way.

"What about Aleck Reese?" he began with fierce abruptness.

The girl met the question with unwonted flippancy. "I've broken my engagement to Aleck Reese," she said coolly. "Broken it all to smash."

But the latent tremor in her voice did not satisfy the man. "Why did you break it?" he insisted. "Isn't Aleck Reese the man you want?"

Her eyes wavered and fell, and then rallied suddenly to Drew's utmost question.

"Yes, Drew," she answered ingenuously, "Aleck Reese *is* the man I want, *but he's not the kind of man I want!*" As the telltale sentence left her lips, every atom of strength wilted out of her, and she sank back into her chair all sick and faint and shuddery.

The impulsive, bitter laugh died dumb on Drew's lips. Instantly he was at her side, gentle, patient, compassionate, the man whom she knew so well. "Do you mean," he stammered in a startled sort of way, "do you mean that—love or no love—I, I am the kind of man that you do want?"

Her hand stole shyly into his and she nodded her head. But her eyes were turned away from him.

For the fraction of a second he wondered just what the future would hold for him and her if he should snatch the situation into his arms and crush her sorrow out against his breast. Then in

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that second's hesitancy she shook her hair out of her eyes and looked up at him like a sick, wistful child.

"Oh, Drew," she pleaded, "you've never, never failed me yet—all my hard lessons, all my Fourth-of-July accidents, all my broken sleds and lost skates. Couldn't you help me now we're grown up? I'm so unhappy."

The grimness came back to Drew's face.

"Has Aleck Reese been mean to you?" he asked.

Her eyebrows lifted in denial. "Oh, no—not specially," she finished a trifle wearily. "I simply made up my mind at last that I didn't want to marry him."

Drew's frown relaxed. "Then what's the trouble?" he suggested.

Her eyebrows arched again. "What's the trouble?" she queried. "Why, I happen to love him. That's all."

She took her hand away from Drew and began to smooth her skirt once more.

"Yes," she repeated slowly, "as long ago as last winter I made up my mind that I didn't want to marry him—but I didn't make up my courage until Spring. My courage, I think, is just about six months slower than my mind. And then, too, my 'love-margin' wasn't quite used up, I suppose. A woman usually has a 'love-margin,' you know, and, besides, there's always so much more impetus in a woman's love. Even though she's hurt, even though she's heartbroken, even though, worst of all, she's a tiny bit bored, all her little, natural love courtesies go on just the same of their own momentum, for a day or a week, or a month, or half a lifetime, till the love-flame kindles again—or else goes out altogether. Love has to be like that. But if I were a man, Drew, I'd be awfully careful that that love-margin didn't ever get utterly exhausted. Aleck, though, doesn't understand about such things. I smoothed his headaches just as well, and listened to his music just as well, so he shiftlessly took it for granted that I loved him just as well. What nonsense! 'Love?'" Her voice rose almost shrilly. "'Love?' Bah! What's love, anyway, but a wicked sort of hypnotism in the way that a mouth slants, or a cheek curves, or a lock of hair colors? Listen to me. If Aleck Reese were a woman and I were a man, I certainly wouldn't choose his type for a sweetheart—irritable, undomestic, wild for excitement. How's that for a test? And if Aleck Reese and I were both women, I certainly shouldn't want him for my friend. Oughtn't that to decide it? Not a vital taste in common, not a vital interest, not a vital ideal!"

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She began to laugh hysterically. "And I can't sleep at night for remembering the droll little way that his hair curls over his forehead, or the hurt, surprised look in his eyes when he ever really did get sorry about anything. My God! Drew, look at me!" she cried, and rolled up her sleeves to her elbow. The flesh was gone from her as though a fever had wasted her.

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The muscles in Drew's throat began to twitch unpleasantly. "Was Aleck Reese mean to you?" he persisted doggedly.

A little faint, defiant smile flickered across her lips. "Never mind, Drew," she said, "whether Aleck Reese was mean to me or not. It really doesn't matter. It doesn't really matter at all just exactly what a man does or doesn't do to a woman as long as, by one route or another, before her wedding day, he brings her to the place where she can honestly say in her heart, 'This man that I want is not the kind of man that I want.' Honor, loyalty, strength, gentleness—why, Drew, the man I marry has *got* to be the kind of man I want.

"I've tried to be fair to Aleck," she mused almost tenderly. "I've tried to remember always that men are different from women, and that Aleck perhaps is different from most men. I've tried to remember always that he is a musician—a real, real musician with all the ghastly, agonizing extremes of temperament. I've tried to remember always that he didn't grow up here with us in our little town with all our fierce, little-town standards, but that he was educated abroad, that his whole moral, mental, and social ideals are different, that the admiration and adulation of—new—women is like the breath of life to him—that he simply couldn't live without it any more than I could live without the love of animals, or the friendship of children, or the wonderfulness of outdoors, all of which bore *him* to distraction.

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"Oh, I've reasoned it all out, night after night after night, fought it out, *torn* it out, that he probably really and truly did love me quite a good deal—in his own way—when there wasn't anything else to do. But how can it possibly content a woman to have a man love her as well as *he* knows how—if it isn't as well as *she* knows how? We won't talk about—Aleck Reese's morals," she finished abruptly. "Fickleness, selfishness, neglect, even infidelity itself, are such purely minor, incidental data of the one big, incurably rotten and distasteful fact that—such and such a man is *stupid in the affections*."

With growing weakness she sank back in her chair and closed her eyes.

For an anxious moment Drew sat and watched her. "Is that all?" he asked at last.

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She opened her eyes in surprise. "Why, yes," she said, "that's all—that is, it's all if you understand. I'm not complaining because Aleck Reese didn't love me, but because, loving me, he wasn't *intelligent* enough to be true to me. You do understand, don't you? You understand that it wasn't because he didn't pay his love bills, but because he didn't know enough to pay them. He

took my loyalty without paying for it with his; he took my devotion, my tenderness, my patience, without ever, ever making any adequate return. Any girl ought to be able to tell in six months whether her lover is using her affection rightly, whether he is taking her affection and investing it with his toward their mutual happiness and home. Aleck invested nothing. He just took all my love that he could grab and squandered it on himself—always and forever on himself. A girl, I say, ought to be able to tell in six months. But I am very stupid. It has taken me three years."

"Well, what do you want *me* to do?" Drew asked a bit quizzically.

"I want you to advise me," she said.

"Advise you—*what?*" persisted Drew.

The first real flicker of comedy flamed in the girl's face. Her white cheeks pinked and dimpled. "Why, advise me to—marry *you!*" she announced. "WELL, WHY NOT?" She fairly hurled the three-word bridge across the sudden, awful chasm of silence that yawned before her. [209]

Drew's addled mind caught the phrase dully and turned it over and over without attempting to cross on it. "Well, why not? Well, why not?" he kept repeating. His discomfiture filled the girl with hysterical delight, and she came and perched herself opposite him on the farther end of his desk and smiled at him.

"It seems to me perfectly simple," she argued. "Without any doubt or question you certainly are the kind of man whom I should like to marry. You are true and loyal and generous and rugged about things. And you like the things that I like. And I like the people that you like. And, most of anything in the world, you are *clever in the affections*. You are heart-wise as well as head-wise. Why, even in the very littlest, silliest thing that could possibly matter, you wouldn't—for instance—remember George Washington's birthday and forget mine. And you wouldn't go away on a lark and leave me if I was sick, any more than you'd blow out the gas. And you wouldn't—hurt me about—other women—any more than you'd eat with your knife." Impulsively she reached over and patted his hand with the tips of her fingers. "As far as I can see," she teased, "there's absolutely no fault in you that matters to me except that I don't happen to love you." [210]

Quick as her laugh the tears came scalding back to her eyes.

"Why, Drew," she hurried on desperately, "people seem to think it's a dreadful thing to marry a man whom you don't love; but nobody questions your marrying *any* kind of a man if you do love him. As far as I can make out, then, it's the love that matters, not the man. Then why not love the right man?" She began to smile again. "So here and now, sir, I deliberately choose to love *you*."

But Drew's fingers did not even tighten over hers.

"I want to be a happy woman," she pleaded. "Why, I'm only twenty-two. I can't let my life be ruined now. There's *got* to be some way out. And I'm going to find that way out if I have to crawl on my hands and knees for a hundred years. I'm luckier than some girls. I've got such a shining light to aim for."

Almost roughly Drew pulled his hand away, the color surging angrily into his cheeks. "I'm no shining light," he protested hotly, "and you shall never, never come crawling on your hands and knees to me." [211]

"Yes, I shall," whispered the girl. "I shall come creeping very humbly, if you want me. And you do want me, don't you? Oh, please advise me. Oh, please play you are my Father or my Big Brother and advise me to—marry *you*."

Drew laughed in spite of himself. "Play I was your Father or your Big Brother?" Mimicry was his one talent. "Play I was your Father or your Big Brother and advise you to marry me?"

Instantly his fine, straight brows came beetling down across his eyes in a fierce paternal scrutiny. Then, quick as a wink, he had rumbled his hair and stuck out his chest in a really startling imitation of Big Brother's precious, pompous importance. But before Ruth could clap her hands his face flashed back again into its usual keen, sad gravity, and he shook his head. "Yes," he deliberated, "perhaps if I truly were your Father or your Brother, I really should advise you to marry—me—not because I amount to anything and am worth it, but because I honestly believe that I should be good to you—and I know that Aleck Reese wouldn't be. But if I'm to advise you in my own personal capacity—no, Ruthy, I don't want to marry you!"

"What? What?" Staggering from the desk, she turned and faced him, white as her dress, blanched to her quivering lips. [212]

But Drew's big shoulders blocked her frenzied effort to escape.

"Don't go away like that, Little Girl," he said. "You don't understand. It isn't a question of caring. You know I care. But don't you, don't you understand that a man doesn't like to marry a woman who doesn't love him?"

Her face brightened piteously. "But I *will* love you?" she protested. "I *will* love you. I promise. I promise you faithfully—I will love you—if you'll only give me just a little time." The old flicker of mischief came back to her eyes, and she began to count on her fingers. "Let me see," she said. "It's June now—June, July, August, September, October, November—six months. I promise you that I will love you by November."

"I don't believe it." Drew fairly slashed the words into the air.

Instantly the hurt, frightened look came back to her eyes. "Why, Drew," she whispered, "if it were money that I wanted, if I were starving, or sick, or any all-alone anything, you wouldn't refuse to help me just because you couldn't possibly see ahead just how I was ever going to pay you. Drew, I'm very unhappy and frightened and lost-feeling. I just want to borrow your love. I promise you I will pay it back to you. You won't be sorry. You won't. You won't!"

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Drew's hand reached up and smothered the words on her lips. "You can't borrow my love," he said sternly. "It's yours, always, every bit of it. But I won't marry you unless you love me. I tell you it isn't fair to you."

Impulsively she took his hand and led him back to the big chair and pushed him gently into it, and perched herself like a little child on a pile of bulky law books at his feet. The eyes that looked up to his were very hopeful.

"Don't you think, Drew," she argued, "that just being willing to marry you is love enough?"

He scanned her face anxiously for some inner, hidden meaning to her words, some precious, latent confession; but her eyes were only blue, and just a little bit shy.

She stooped forward suddenly, and took Drew's hand and brushed it across her cheek to the edge of her lips. "I feel so safe with you, Drew," she whispered, "so safe, and comforted always. Oh, I'm sure I can teach you how to make me love you—and you're the only man in the world that I'm willing to teach." Her chin stiffened suddenly with renewed stubbornness. "You are the Harbor that was meant for me, and Aleck Reese is nothing but a—Storm. If you know it, and I know it, what's the use of dallying?"

Drew's solemn eyes brightened. "Do you truly think," he said, "that Aleck Reese is only an accident that happened to you on your way to me?"

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She nodded her head. Weakness and tears were only too evidently overtaking her brave little theories.

"And there's something else, too," she confided tremulously. "My head isn't right. I have such hideous dreams when I do get to sleep. I dream of drowning myself, and it feels good; and I dream of jumping off high buildings, and it feels good; and I dream of throwing myself under railroad trains, and it feels good. And I see the garish announcement in the morning papers, and I picture how Uncle Terry would look when he got the news, and I cry and cry and cry, and it feels good. Oh, Drew, I'm so bored with life! It isn't right to be so bored with life. But I can't seem to help it. Nothing in all the world has any meaning any more. Flowers, sunshine, moonlight—everything I loved has gone stale. There's no taste left to anything; there's no fragrance, there's no rhyme. Drew, I could stand the sorrow part of it, but I simply can't stand the emptiness. I tell you I *can't* stand it. I wish I were dead; and, Drew, there are so many, many easy ways all the time to make oneself dead. I'm not safe. Oh, please take me and make me safe. Oh, please take me and make me want to live!"

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Driven almost distracted by this final appeal to all the chivalrous love in his nature, Drew jumped up and paced the floor. Perplexity, combativeness, and ultimate defeat flared already in his haggard face.

The girl sensed instantly the advantage that she had gained. "Of course," she persisted, "of course I see now, all of a sudden, that I'm not offering you very much in offering you a wife who doesn't love you. You are quite right; of course I shouldn't make you a very good wife at first—maybe not for quite a long, long time. Probably it would all be too hard and miserable for you—"

Drew interrupted her fiercely. "Great heavens!" he cried out, "my part would be easy, comfortable, serene, interesting, compared to yours. Don't you know it's nothing except *sad* to be shut up in the same house, in the same life, with a person you love who doesn't love you? Nothing but sad, I tell you; and there's no special nervous strain about being sad. But to be shut up day and night—as long as life lasts—with a person who takes the impudent liberty of loving you against your wish to be loved—oh, the spiritual distastefulness of it, and the physical enmity, and the ghastly, ghastly ennui! That's your part of it. Flower or book or jewel or caress, no agonizing, heart-breaking, utterly wholesome effort to please, but just one hideously chronic, mawkishly conscientious effort to *be* pleased, to act pleased—though it blast your eyes and sear your lips—to *look* pleased. I tell you I won't have it!"

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"I understand all that," said Ruth gravely. "I understand it quite perfectly. But underneath it all—I would rather—you had taken me in your arms—as though I were a little, little hurt girl—and comforted me—"

But before Drew's choking throat-cry had reached his lips she had sprung from her seat and was facing him defiantly. Across her face flared suddenly for the first time the full, dark flush of one of Life's big tides, and the fear in her hands reached up and clutched at Drew's shoulders. The gesture tipped her head back like a fagged swimmer's struggling in the water.

"I am pleading for my life, Drew," she gasped, "for my body, for my soul, for my health, for my happiness, for home, for safety!"

He snatched her suddenly into his arms. "My God! Ruth," he cried, "what do you want me to

do?"

Triumph came like a holiday laugh to her haggard face.

"What do I want you to do?" she dimpled. "Why, I want you to come with me now and get a license. I want to be married right away this afternoon." [217]

"What!" Drew hurled the word at her like a bomb, but it did not seem to explode.

Laughingly, flushing, almost delightedly, she stood and watched the anger rekindle in his face.

"Do you think I am going to take advantage of you like this?" he asked hotly. "You would probably change your mind to-morrow and be very, very sorry—"

She tossed her head. It was a familiar little gesture. "I fully and confidently expect to be sorry to-morrow," she affirmed cheerfully. "That's why I want to be married to-day, this afternoon, this minute, if possible, before I have had any chance to change my mind."

Then, with unexpected abruptness, she shook her recklessness aside and walked back to him childishly, pulling a long, loose wisp of hair across her face. "See," she said. "Smell the smoke in my hair. It's the smoke from my burned bridges. I sat up nearly all night and burned everything I owned, everything that could remind me of Aleck Reese, all my dresses, all my books, all my keepsakes, all my doll houses that ever grew up into dreams. So if you decide to marry me I shall be very expensive. You'll have to take me just as I am—quite a little bit crumpled, not an extra collar, not an extra hairpin, not anything. Aleck Reese either loved or hated everything I owned. I haven't left a single bridge on which one of my thoughts could even crawl back to him again—" [218]

Half quizzically, half caressingly, Drew stooped down and brushed his lips across the lock of hair. Fragrant as violets, soft as the ghost of a kiss, the little curl wafted its dearness into his senses. But ranker than violets, harsher than kisses, lurked the blunt, unmistakable odor of ashes.

He laughed. And the laugh was bitter as gall. "Burning your bridges," he mused. "It's a good theory. But if I take your life into my bungling hands and sweat my heart out trying to make you love me, and come home every night to find you crying with fear and heartbreak, will you still protest that the sting in your eyes is nothing in the world except the *smudge* from those burnt bridges? Will you promise?"

With desperate literalness she clutched at the phrase. Everything else in the room began to whirl round and round like prickly stars. "I promise, I promise," she gasped. Then sight—not air, but just sight—seemed to be smothered right out of her, and her brain reeled, and she wilted down unconscious on the floor.

Cursing himself for a brute, Drew snatched her up in a little, white, crumpled heap and started for the window. Halfway there, the office door opened abruptly and Ruth's Big Brother stood on the threshold. Surprise, anxiety, ultimate relief chased flashingly across the newcomer's face, and in an instant both men were working together over the limp little body. [219]

"Well, old man," said the Big Brother, "I'm glad she was here safe with you when she fainted." His spare arm clapped down affectionately across Drew's shoulders and jarred Drew's fingers brownly against the death-like pallor of the girl's throat. The Big Brother gave an ugly gasp. "Damn Aleck Reese," he said.

Drew's eyes shut perfectly tight as though he was smitten by some unbearable agony. Then suddenly, without an instant's warning, he pulled himself together and burst out laughing uproariously like a schoolboy.

"Oh, what's the use of damning Aleck Reese?" he cried. "Aleck Reese is as stale an issue as yesterday morning's paper. If you've no particular objection to me as a brother-in-law as well as a tennis chum, Ruth and I were planning to marry each other this afternoon. Maybe I was just a little bit too vehement about it."

Three hours later, in a dusty, musty, mid-week church vestry, an extraordinarily white and extraordinarily vivacious girl was quite busy assuring a credulous minister and a credulous sexton and a credulous Big Brother that she would love till death hushed her the perfectly incredulous bridegroom who stood staring down upon her like a very tall man in a very short dream. [220]

And then, because neither groom nor bride could think of anything specially married to say to each other, they kidnapped Big Brother and bore him away in an automobile to a nervous, rollicking, wonderfully entertaining "shore dinner," where they sat at an open window round a green-tiled table in a marvelously glowering, ice-cool, artificial grotto, and ate bright scarlet lobsters while the great, hot, blowzy yellow moon came wallowing up out of the night-shadowed sea, and the thrilly, thumpy brass band played "I Love You So"; and the only, only light in the whole vague, noisy room seemed to be Big Brother's beaming, ecstatic face gleaming like some glad phosphorescent thing through the clouds of murky tobacco smoke.

Not till the wines and dines and roses and posies and chatter and clatter were all over, and the automobile had carried Big Brother off to his railroad station and whisked the bride and groom back to the wobbly city pavements, did Drew begin to realize that the frolicking, jesting, crisp-tongued figure beside him had wilted down into a piteous little hunch of fear. Stooping to push her slippery new suit case closer under her feet, he caught the sharp, shuddering tremor of her knees, and as the automobile swayed finally into the street that led to his apartment, her lungs seemed to crumple up in a paroxysm of coughing. Under the garish lights that marked his apartment-house doorway her slight figure drooped like a tired flower, and the footsteps that tinkled behind him along the stone corridor rang in his ears with a dear, shy, girlish reluctance. The elevator had stopped running. One flight, two flights, three, four, five they toiled up the harsh, cool, metallic stairway. Four times Ruth stopped to get her breath, and twice to tie her shoe. Drew laughed to himself at the delicious subterfuge of it.

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Then at the very top of the strange, gloomy, midnight building, when Drew's nervous fingers fumbled a second with his door-lock, without the slightest possible warning she reached out suddenly with one mad, frenzied impulse and struck the key from his hand. To his startled eyes she turned a face more wild, more agonized than any terror he had ever dreamed in his most hideous, sweating nightmare. Instantly her hands went clutching out to him.

"Oh, Drew, for God's sake take me home!" she gasped. "What have I done? What have I done? What have I done? Oh, ALECK!"

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Wrenching himself free from her hands, Drew dropped down on the floor and began to hunt around for the key. The blood surged into his head like a hot tide, and he felt all gritty-lunged and smothered, as though he were crawling under water. After a minute he stumbled to his feet and slipped the recreant key smoothly into the lock, and swung his door wide open, and turned back to Ruth. She stood facing him defiantly, her eyes blazing, her poor hands twisting.

Drew nodded toward the door, and shoved the suit case with his foot across the threshold. His face was very stern and set.

"You want me to take you 'home'?" he said. "*This* is home. What do you mean? Take you back to your Brother's house? You can't go back to your Brother's house on your wedding day. It wouldn't be fair to me. And I won't help you do an unfair thing *even* to me. You've *got* to give me a chance!"

He nodded again toward the open door, but the girl did not budge. His face brightened suddenly, and he stepped back to where she was standing, and lifted her up in his arms and swung her to his shoulder and stumbled through the pitch-black doorway. "Do you remember," he cried, "the day at your grammar-school picnic when I carried you over the railroad trestle because the locomotive that was swooping down upon us round the curve had scared all the starch out of your legs? Look out for your head now, honey, and I'll give you a very good imitation of a cave man bringing home his bride."

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In another moment he had switched a blaze of electric light into his diminutive library, and deposited his sobbing burden none too formally in the big easy chair that blocked almost all the open space between his desk and his bookcases. "What! Aren't you laughing, too?" he cried in mock alarm. But the crumpled little figure in the big chair did not answer to his raillery.

Until it seemed as though he would totter from his wavering foothold, Drew stood and watched her dumbly. Then a voice that sounded strange even to himself spoke out of his lips.

"Ruth—come here," he said.

She raised her rumpled head in astonishment, gaged for a throbbing instant the new authoritative glint in his eyes, and then slipped cautiously out of her chair and came to him, reeking with despair. For a second they just stood and stared at each other, white face to white face, a map of anger confronting a map of fear.

"You understand," said Drew, "that to-day, by every moral, legal, religious right and rite, you have delivered your life over utterly into my hands?" His voice was like ice.

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"Yes, I understand," she answered feebly, with the fresh tears gushing suddenly into her eyes.

Drew's mouth relaxed. "You understand?" he repeated. "Well—forget it! And never, never, never, as long as you and I are together, never, I say, understand anything but this: you can cry about Aleck Reese all you want to, but you sha'n't cry about me. You can count on that anyway." He started to smile, but his mouth twitched instead with a wince of pain. "And I thought I could really bring you heart's-ease," he scoffed. "Heart's-ease? Bah!"

"Heart's-ease. Bah!" The familiar phrase exploded Ruth's inflammable nerves into hysterical laughter. "Why, that's what the lamb said," she cried, "when I fed him on my pansy posies. 'Heart's-ease. B-a-h!'" And her sudden burst of even unnatural delight cleared her face for the moment of all its haggard tragedy, and left her once more just a very fragile, very plaintive, very helpless, tear-stained child. "You *b-a-a* exactly like the lamb," she suggested with timid, snuffling pleasantries; and at the very first suspicion of a reluctant twinkle at the corner of Drew's eyes she reached up her trembling little hands to his shoulders and held him like a vise with a touch so light, so faint, so timorous that it could hardly have detained the shadow of a humming-bird.

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For a moment she stared exploringly round the unfamiliar, bright little room crowded so

horribly, cruelly close with herself, her mistake, and the life-long friend loomed so suddenly and undesirably into a man. Then with a quick, shuddery blink her eyes came flashing back wetly and wistfully to the unsolved, inscrutable face before her. Her fingers dug themselves frantically into his cheviot shoulders.

"Oh, Drew, Drew," she blurted out, "I am so very—very—very—frightened! Won't you please take me and play you are my—Mother?"

"Play I am your Mother? *Play I am your Mother!*" The phrase ripped out of Drew's lips like an oath, and twitched itself just in time into explosive, husky mirth. "Play I am your Mother?" The teeniest grimace over his left shoulder outlined the soft silken swish and tug of a lady's train. A most casual tap at his belt seemed to achieve instantly the fashionable hour-glass outline of feminine curves. "Play I am your Mother!" He smiled and, stooping down, took Ruth's scared white face between his hands, and his smile was as bright—and just about as pleasant—as a zigzag of lightning from a storm-black sky.

"Ruthy dear," he said, "I don't feel very much like your Mother. Now if it was a cannibal that you wanted, or a pirate, or a kidnapper, or a body-snatcher, or a general all-round robber of widows and orphans, why, here I am, all dressed and trained and labeled for the part. But a *Mother*—" The smile went zigzagging again across his face just as a big, wet, scalding tear came trickling down the girl's cheek into his fingers. The feeling of that tear made his heart cramp unpleasantly. "Oh, hang it all," he finished abruptly, "what does a Mother do, anyway?"

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The little white face in his hands flooded instantly with a great desolation. "I don't know," she moaned wearily. "I *never* knew."

For some inexplicable reason Aleck Reese's devilish, insolent beauty flaunted itself suddenly before Drew's vision, and he gave a bitter gasp, and turned away fiercely, and brushed his arm potently across his forehead as though Sex, after all, were nothing but a trivial mask that fastened loosely to the ears.

When he turned round again, his conquered face had that strange, soft, shining, translucent wonder-look in it which no woman all her life long may reap twice from a man's face. Tenderly, serenely, uncaressingly, without passion and without playfulness, he picked up his sad little bride and carried her back to the big, roomy, restful chair, and snuggled her down in his long arms, with her smoke-scented hair across his cheek, and told her funny, giggly little stories, and crooned her funny, sleepy little songs, till her shuddering sobs soothed themselves—oh, so slowly—into lazy, languid, bashful little smiles, and the lazy, languid, bashful little smiles droned off at last into nestling, contented little sighs, and the nestling, contented little sighs blossomed all of a sudden into merciful, peaceful slumber.

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Then, when the warm, gray June dawn was just beginning to flush across the roofs of the city, he put her softly down and slipped away, and took his smallest military brushes, and his smallest dressing-gown, and his smallest slippers, and carried them out to his diminutive guest-room. "It isn't a very big little guest-room," he mused disconsolately, "but then, she isn't a very big little guest. It will hold her, I guess, as long as she's willing to stay."

"As long as she's willing to stay." The phrase puckered his lips. Again Aleck Reese's face flashed before him in all its amazing beauty and magical pathos, a face this time staring across a tiny, ornate café table into the jaded, world-wise eyes of some gorgeous woman of the theatrical demi-monde. At the vision Drew's shoulders squared suddenly as though for a fair fight to the finish, and then wilted down with equal abruptness as his eyes met accidentally in the mirror his own plain, matter-of-fact reflection. The sight fairly mocked him. There was no beauty there. No magic. No brilliance. No talent. No compelling moodiness. No possible promise of "Love and Fame and Far Lands." Nothing. Just eyes and nose and mouth and hair and an ugly baseball scar on his left cheek. Merciful heavens! What had he to fight Aleck Reese with, except the only two virtues that a man may not brag of—a decently clean life and an unstaled love!

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Grinning to rekindle his courage, he started tiptoeing back along the hall to his bedroom and his kitchen, and rolled up his sleeves and began to clean house most furiously; for even if you are quite desperately in love, and a fairly good man besides, it is just a little bit crowded-feeling and disconcerting to have the lady walk unannounced right into your life and your neckties and your pictures, to say nothing of your last week's unwashed cream-jars.

Frantically struggling with his coffee-pot at seven o'clock, he had almost forgotten his minor troubles when a little short, gaspy breath sound made him look up. Huddling her tired-out dress into the ample folds of his dressing-gown, Ruth stood watching him bashfully.

"Hello!" he said. "Who are you?"

"I'm—Mrs.—Andrew Bernard, attorney at law," she announced with stuttering nonchalance, and started off exploringly for the cupboard to find Drew's best green Canton china to deck the kitchen breakfast table. All through the tortuous little meal she sat in absolute tongue-tied gravity, carving her omelet into a hundred infinitesimal pieces and sipping like a professional coffee-taster at Drew's over-rank concoction. Only once did her solemn face lighten with an inspirational flash that made Drew's heart jump. Then, "Oh, Drew," she exclaimed, "do you think you could go out to the house to-day and see if they fed the lamb?"

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"No, I don't," said Drew bluntly, and poured himself out his fifth cup of coffee.

After breakfast, all the time that he was shaving, she came and sat on the edge of a table and watched him with the same maddening gravity, and when he finally started off for his office she followed him down the whole length of his little hallway. "I like my cave!" she volunteered with sudden sociability, and then with a great, pink-flushing wave of consciousness she lifted up her face to him and stammered, "Do I kiss you good-by?"

Drew shook his head and laughed. "No," he said, "you don't even have to do that; I'm not much of a kisser," and turned abruptly and grabbed at the handle of the door.

But before he had crossed the threshold she reached out and pulled him back for a moment, and he had to stoop down very far to hear what she wanted to tell him. "It's nothing much, Drew," she whispered. "It's nothing much at all. I just wanted to say that—considering how strong they are, and how—wild—and strange—I think men are—very—*gentle* creatures. Thank you." And in another instant she had gone back alone to face by crass daylight the tragedy that she had brought into three people's lives. [230]

Certainly in all the days and weeks that followed, Drew never failed to qualify as a "gentle creature." Not a day passed at his office that he did not telephone home with the most casual-sounding pleasantry, "Is everything all right? Any burnt-bridge smoke in the air?" Usually, clear as his own voice, and sometimes even with a little giggle tucked on at the end, the answer came, "Yes, everything's all right." But now and then over that telephone wire a minor note flashed with unmistakably tremulous vibration: "N-o, Drew. Oh, could you come right home—and take me somewhere?"

Drew's brown cheeks hollowed a bit, perhaps, as time went on, but always smilingly, always frankly and jocosely, he met the occasionally recurrent emergencies of his love-life. Underneath his smile and underneath his frankness his original purpose never flinched and never wavered. With growing mental intimacy and absolute emotional aloofness he forced day by day the image and the consciousness of his personality upon the girl's plastic mind: his picture, for instance, as a matter of course for her locket; his favorite, rather odd, colors for her clothes; his sturdy, adventuresome, fleet-footed opinions to run ahead and break in all her strange new thought-grounds for her. More than this, in every possible way that showed to the world he stamped her definitely as the most carefully cherished wife among all her young married mates. [231]

At first the very novelty of the situation had fed his eyes with rapture and fired the girl's face with a feverish excitement almost as pink as happiness. The surprise and congratulations of their friends, the speech of the janitor, the floral offering of the elevator boy, the long procession of silver spoons and cut-glass dishes, had filled their days with interest and laughter. Trig in her light muslin house gowns or her big gingham aprons, Ruth fluttered blissfully around her house like a new, brainy sort of butterfly. By some fine, instinctive delicacy, shrewder than many women's love, she divined and forestalled Drew's domestic tastes and preferences, and lined his simplest, homespun needs with all the quiver and sheen of silk. Resting his weariness, spurring his laziness; equally quick to divine the need of a sofa pillow or a joke; equally interested in his food and his politics; always ready to talk, always ready to keep still; cramping her free suburban ways into his hampered accommodations; missing her garden and her pets and her piazzas without ever acknowledging it—she tried in every plausible way except loving to compensate Drew for the wrong she had done him. [232]

Only once did Drew's smoldering self-control slip the short leash he had set for himself. Just once, round the glowing coziness of a rainy-night open fire, he had dropped his book slammingly on the floor and reached out his hand to her soft hair that brightened like bronze in the lamplight. "Are you happy?" he had probed before he could fairly bite the words back; and she had jumped up, and tossed her hair out of her eyes, and laughed as she started for the kitchen. "No, I'm not exactly happy," she had said. "But I'm awfully—interested."

So June budded into July, and July bloomed into August, and August wilted into September, and September brittled and crisped and flamed at last into October. Tennis and boating and picnics and horseback riding filled up the edges of the days. Little by little the bright, wholesome red came back to live in Ruth's rounding cheeks. Little by little the good steady gleam of normal interests supplanted the wild will-o'-the-wisp lights in her eyes. Little by little her accumulating possessions began to steel shyly out from her tiny room and make themselves boldly at home in the places where hitherto they had ventured only as guests. Her workbasket crowded Drew's tobacco-jar deliberately from the table to the top of the bookcase. Her daring hands nonchalantly replaced a brutally clever cartoon with a soft-toned sketch of a little child. Once, indeed, an ostentatiously freshly laundered dress, all lace and posies and ruffles, went and hung itself brazenly in Drew's roomy closet right next to his fishing clothes. [233]

And then, just as Drew thought that at last he saw Happiness stop and turn and look at him a bit whimsically, Aleck Reese came back to town—Aleck Reese, not as Fate should have had him, drunken with flattery, riotous with revelry, chasing madly some new infatuation, but Aleck Reese sobered, dazed, temporarily purified by the shock of his loss, if not by the loss itself.

For a week, blissfully unconscious of any cause, Drew had watched with growing perplexity and anxiety the sudden, abrupt flag in the girl's health and spirits and general friendliness. Flowers, fruit, candy, books, excursion plans had all successively, one by one, failed to rouse either her interest or her ordinary civility. And then one night, dragging home extra late from a worried, wearisome day at the office, faint for his dinner, sick for his sleep, he found the apartment perfectly dark and cheerless, the fire unlighted, the table unset, and Ruth herself lying

in a paroxysm of grief on the floor under his stumbling feet. With his dizzy head reeling blindly, and his hands shaking like an aspen, he picked her up and tried to carry her to the couch; but she wrenched herself away from him, and walked over to the window and halfway back again before she spoke.

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"Aleck Reese has come home," she announced dully, and reached up unthinkingly and turned a blast of electric light full on her ghastly face.

Drew clutched at the back of the nearest chair. "Have you seen him?" he almost whispered.

The girl nodded. "Yes. He's been here a week. I've seen him twice. Once—all day at the tennis club—and this afternoon I met him on the street, and he came home with me to get—a book."

"Why didn't you tell me before that he was here?"

She shrugged her shoulders wearily. "I thought his coming wasn't going to matter," she faltered, "but—"

"But what?" said Drew.

Her arms fell limply down to her sides and her chin began to quiver.

"He kissed me this afternoon," she stammered, "and I—kissed him. And, worse than that, we were both—glad."

Trying to brush the fog away from his eyes, Drew almost sprang across the room at her, and she gave a queer little cry and fled, not away from him, but right into his arms, as though *there* was her only haven. "Would you be apt to hurt me?" she gasped with a funny-sad sort of inquisitiveness. Then she backed away and held out her hand like a man's to Drew's shaking fingers. "I'm very much ashamed," she said, "about this afternoon. Oh, very, very, very much ashamed. I haven't ever been a really good wife to you, you know, but I never have cheated before until to-day. I promise you faithfully that it sha'n't happen again. But, Drew"—her face flushed utterly crimson—"but, Drew—I honestly think that it *had* to happen to-day."

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Drew's tortured eyes watched her keenly for a second and then his look softened. "Will you please tell Aleck," he suggested, "that you told me all about it and that I—laughed?"

It was not till some time in December, however, after a nervous, evasive, speechless sort of week, that Ruth appeared abruptly one day at Drew's office, looking for all the world like the frightened child who had sought him out there the June before.

"Drew, you're five years older than I am, aren't you?" she began disconnectedly. "And you've always been older than I am, and stronger than I am, and wiser than I am. And you've always gone ahead in school and play and everything, and learned what you wanted to and then come back—and gotten me. And it always made everything—oh, so much easier for me—and I thought it was a magic scheme that simply couldn't fail to work. But I'm afraid I'm not quite as smart as I used to be—I can't seem to catch up with you this time."

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"What do you mean?" said Drew.

She began to fidget with her gloves. "Do you know what month it is?" she asked abruptly.

"Why, yes," said Drew, just a bit drearily. "It's December. What of it?"

Her eyes blurred, but she kept them fixed steadily on her husband. "Why, don't you remember," she gasped, "that when we were married I promised you faithfully that I would love you within six months? The six months were up in November—but I find I'm not quite ready—yet. You'll have to give me a little more time," she pleaded. "You'll have to renew my love-loan. Will you?"

Drew slammed down his law books and forced his mouth into a grin. "I'd forgotten all about that arrangement," he said. "Of course I'll renew what you call your 'love-loan.' Really and truly I didn't expect you to love me before a full year was up. Heart-wounds don't ever even begin to heal until their first anniversaries are passed—all the Christmases and birthdays and Easters. And, really, I'd quite as soon anyway that you didn't love me till Spring," he added casually. "I'm so hideously busy and worried just now with business things."

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She gave him an odd little look that barely grazed his face and settled flutteringly on the book in his hand. It was a ponderous-looking treatise on "The Annulment of Marriage." Her heart began to pound furiously. "Drew!" she blurted out, "I simply can't stand things any longer. I shall go mad. I've tried and tried and tried to be good, and it's no use. I must be stupid. I must be a fool. BUT I WANT TO GO HOME!"

"All right," said Drew very quietly, "you—can—go—home."

In another instant, without good-by or regret, she had flashed out of the office and was racing down the stairs. Halfway to the street she missed her handkerchief, and started reluctantly back to get it. The office door was locked, but she tiptoed round to a private side entrance and opened the door very cautiously and peeped in.

Prostrate across his great, cluttered desk, Drew, the serene, the laughing, the self-sufficient, lay sobbing like a woman.

Startled as though she had seen a ghost, the girl backed undetected out of the door, and closed it very softly behind her, nor did she stop tiptoeing until she had reached the street floor. Then, dropping down weak-kneed upon the last step, she sat staring out into the dingy patch of snow that flared now and then through the swinging doorway. Somewhere out in that vista Aleck Reese was waiting and watching for her. Two or three of her husband's business acquaintances paused and accosted her. "Anything the matter?" they probed.

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"Oh, no," she answered brightly. "I'm just thinking."

After a while she jumped up abruptly and stole back through a box-cluttered hall to the rear door of the building, and slid out unnoticed into a side street, gathering her great fur coat—Drew's latest gift—closer and closer around her shivering body. The day was gray and bleak and scarily incomplete, like the work of some amateur creator who had slipped up on the one essential secret of how to make the sun shine. The jingliest sound of sleigh-bells, the reddest flare of holiday shop windows, could not cheer her thoughts away from the stinging, shuddering memory of Drew's crumpled shoulders, the gasping catch of his breath, the strange new flicker of gray at his temples. Over and over to herself she kept repeating dully: "I've hurt Drew just the way that Aleck hurt me. It mustn't be. It mustn't be—it mustn't! There's got to be some way out!"

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Then most unexpectedly, at the first street corner she was gathered up joyously by a crowd of her young married chums who were starting off in an automobile for their sewing-club in Ruth's own old-home suburb fifteen miles away. It was a long time since she had played very freely with women, and the old associations caught her interest with a novel charm. Showered with candy, gay with questions, happy with laughter, the party whizzed up at last to the end of its journey, and tumbled out rosy with frost and mischief to join the women who had already arrived. From every individual corner of the warm, lazy sewing-room some one seemed to jump up and greet Ruth's return. "Oh, you pampered young bride!" they teased, and "Will you look at the wonderful fur coat and hat that have happened to Ruth!" Even the sad-faced, widowed little dressmaker who always officiated professionally at the club wriggled out of her seat and brought her small boy 'way across the room to stroke the girl's sumptuous mink-brown softness.

"Why, am I so very wonderful?" stammered Ruth, staring down with her hands in her pockets at the great fur length and breadth of her.

"Well, if I had a coat like that," scoffed a shrill voice from the sofa, "I should think that it was the most wonderful thing in life that could happen to me."

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Standing there scorching herself in the fire-glow, Ruth looked up suddenly with a fierce sort of intentness. "You wise old married people," she cried, "tell me truly what really is the most wonderful thing in life that can happen to a woman?"

"Goodness, is it a new riddle?" shouted her hostess, and instantly a dozen noisy answers came rollicking into the contest. "Money!" cried the extravagant one. "A husband who goes to the club every night!" screamed the flirt. "Health!" "Curls!" "Dresden china!" "Single blessedness!" the suggestions came piling in. Only the dressmaker's haggard face whitened comprehendingly to the hunger underneath Ruth's laughing eyes. Staring scornfully at the heaping luxuries all around her, the shabby, widow-marked woman snatched up her child and cuddled it to her breast. "The most wonderful thing in life that can happen to a woman?" she quoted passionately. "I'll tell you what it is. It's being able to hope that your son will be *exactly* like his father."

"Exactly like his father?" The shrewd sting and lash of the words ripped through Ruth's senses like the scorch of a red-hot fuse. Strength, tenderness, patience, love, loyalty flamed up before her with such dazzling brilliance that she could scarcely fathom the features behind them, and the room whirled dizzily with sudden excessive heat. "Exactly like his father." A dozen feminine voices caught up the phrase and dropped it blisteringly. The wife of the town's *bon vivant* winced a trifle. The most radiant bride of the year jabbed her fingers accidentally with her scissors. Some one started to sigh and laughed instead. A satirical voice suggested, "Well, but of course there's got to be some improvement in every generation."

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Smothering for air, Ruth reached up bunglingly and fastened her big fur collar and started for the door. "Oh, no," she protested to every one's detaining hands, "honestly I didn't intend to stay. I've got to hurry over to the house and get some things before dark," and, pleading several equally legitimate excuses, she bolted out into the snowy fields to take the quickest possible short cut to her Big Brother's house.

Every plowing step drove her heart pounding like an engine, and every lagging footfall started her scared thoughts throbbing louder than her heart. Hurry as fast as she could, stumbling over drift-hidden rocks or floundering headlong into some hollow, she could not seem to outdistance the startling, tumultuous memory of the little dressmaker's passion-glorified eyes staring scornfully down on the slowly sobering faces of the women around her. The vision stung itself home to the girl like sleet in her eyes.

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"O-h!" she groaned. "What a wicked thing Life is—wasting a man like Drew on a girl—like me. 'To be able to hope that your son will be exactly like his father!'" Her heart jumped. Merciful heavens! If Happiness were really—only as simple a thing as that—just to look in your husband's eyes and find them good. Years and years hence, perhaps, she herself might have a son—with all his father's blessed, winsome virtues. Her eyes flooded suddenly with angry tears. "Oh, could Fate possibly, possibly be so tricky as to make a woman love her son because he *was* like his father, and yet all, all the long years make that woman just miss loving the father himself?"

With a little frightened gasp she began to run. "If I only can get to the house," she reasoned, "then everything will be all right. And I'll never leave it again."

Half an hour later, panting and flushing, she twisted her latch-key through the familiar home door. No one was there to greet her. From attic to cellar the whole house was deserted. At first the emptiness and roominess seemed to ease and rest her, but after a little while she began to get lonesome, and started out to explore familiar corners, and found them unfamiliar. "What an ugly new wall-paper!" she fretted; "and what a silly way to set the table!" Her old room smote upon her with strange surprise—not cunningly, like one's funny little baby clothes, but distastefully, like a last year's outgrown coat. In the large, light pantry a fresh disappointment greeted her. "What an insipid salad!" she mourned. "It isn't half as nice as the salad Drew makes." Cookies, cakes, doughnuts failed her successively. "And I used to think they were the best I ever tasted," she puzzled. In the newly upholstered parlor a queer unrest sickened her. "Why, the house doesn't seem quite to—fit me any more," she acknowledged, and bundled herself into her coat again, and stuffed her pockets with apples, and started off more gladly for the barn.

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As she pushed back the heavy sliding doors a horse whinnied, possibly for welcome, but probably for oats. Teased by the uncertainty, the girl threw back her head and laughed. "Hello, all you animals," she cried; "I have come home. Isn't it fine?"

Up from the floor of his pen the lamb rose clatteringly like a mechanical toy, and met the glad news with a peculiarly disdainful "B-a-a-a!" Back to the sheltering wood-pile her old friends the kittens—little cats now—fled from her with precipitous fear. The white-nosed cow reared back with staring eyes. The pet horse snapped at her fingers instead of the apple. The collie dog, to be sure, came jumping boisterously, but the jumpiness was unmistakably because he was "Carlo," and not because she was "Ruth." And yet only six months before every animal on the place had looked like her with that strange, absurd mimicry of human expression that characterizes the faces of all much-cherished birds or beasties. And now even the collie dog had reverted to the plain, blank-featured canine street type—and the pet horse looked like the hired man.

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The girl's forehead puckered up into a bewildered sort of frown. "I don't quite seem to belong anywhere," she concluded. The thought was unpleasant. Worst of all, the increasing, utterly unexplainable sob in her throat made her feel very reluctant to go back into the house and wait for her Brother and the Housekeeper and the inevitable questions. Dallying there on the edge of the wheelbarrow, munching her red-cheeked apples, it was almost eight o'clock before her mind quickened to a solution of her immediate difficulties. She would hide in the hay all night, there in the sweetness and softness of last summer's beautiful grass, and think out her problems and decide what to do.

Deep in the hay she burrowed out a nest, and lined it with the biggest buffalo robe and the thickest carriage rug. Then one by one she carried up the astonished kittens, and the heavy, fat lamb, and the scrambling collie dog to keep her company, and snuggled herself down, warm and content, to drowse and dream amidst the musty cobwebs, and the short, sharp snap of straws, and the soothing sighs of the sleepy cow, and the stamp, stamp of the horse, and all the extra, indefinite, scary, lonesome night noises that keep your nerves exploding intermittently like torpedoes and start your common sense scouring like a silver polish at all the tarnished values of your everyday life.



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"Hello, all you animals," she cried

Midnight found her lying wide awake and starry-eyed, with her red lips twisted into an oddly inscrutable smile. Close in her left hand the collie dog nestled his grizzly nose. Under her right arm the woolly lamb slumbered. Over her quiet feet the little cats purred with fire-gleaming faces.

Attracted by the barking of his new bulldog, Big Brother came out in the early morning and discovered her in the hay.

"Well, for heaven's sake!" he began. "Where did you come from? Where does Drew think you are? He's been telephoning here all night trying to find you. I guess he's scared to death. Great Scott! what's the matter? What are you hiding out here for? Have you had any trouble with Drew?"

She slid down out of her nest with the jolliest sort of a laugh. "Of course I haven't had any trouble with Drew. I just wanted to come home. That's all. Drew buys me everything else," she dimpled, "but he simply won't buy me any hay—and I'm such a donkey."

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Big Brother shrugged his shoulders. "You're just as foolish as ever," he began, and then finished abruptly with "What a perfectly absurd way to do your hair! It looks like fury."

An angry flush rose to her cheeks, and she reached up her hands defensively. "It suits Drew all right," she retorted.

Big Brother laughed. "Well, come along in the house and get your breakfast and telephone Drew."

The funniest sort of an impulse smote suddenly upon Ruth's mind. "I don't want any breakfast," she protested, "and I don't want any telephone. I'm going home this minute to surprise Drew. We were going to have broiled chicken, and a new dining-room table, and a pot of primroses as big as your head. Shall I have time to wash my face before the car comes?"

Ten minutes after that she was running like mad to the main street. An hour later the big, whizzing electric car that was speeding her back to the city crashed headlong at a curve into another brittling, splintering mass of screams and blood and broken glass and shivering woodwork.

When she came to her senses she was lying in her blood-stained furs on some one's piazza floor, and the horrid news of the accident must have traveled very quickly, for a great crowd of people was trampling round over the snowy lawn, and Big Brother and Aleck Reese and the old family doctor seemed to have dropped down right out of the snow-whirling sky. Just as she opened her eyes, Aleck Reese, haggard with fear and dissipation, was kneeling down trying to slip his arms under her.

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With the mightiest possible effort she lifted her forefinger warningly.

"Don't you dare touch me," she threatened. "I promised Drew—"

The doctor looked up astonished into her wide-open eyes. "Now, Ruth," he begged, "don't you make any fuss. We've got to get you into a carriage. We'll try not to hurt you any more than is absolutely necessary."

Her shattered nerves failed her utterly. "What nonsense!" she sobbed. "You don't have to hurt me at all. My own man never hurts me at all. I tell you I want my own man."

"But we can't find Drew," protested the doctor.

Then the blood came gushing back into her eyes and some wicked brute took her bruised knees, and her wrenched back, and her broken collar bone, and her smashed head, and jarred them all up together like a bag of junk, and she gave one awful, blood-curdling yell—and a horse whinnied—and everything in the world stopped happening like a run-down clock.

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When Time began to tick normally again, she found herself lying with an almost solid cotton face in a pleasant, puffy bed that seemed to rock, and roll, and tug against her straining arm that clutched its fingers like an anchor into somebody's perfectly firm, kind hand. As far away as a voice on a shore, tired, hoarse, desperately incessant, some one was signaling reassurance to her: "You're all right, honey, You're all right, honey."

After a long time her fingers twittered in the warm grasp. "Who are you?" she stammered perplexedly.

"Just your 'own man,'" whispered Drew.

The lips struggling out from the edge of the bandage quivered a little. "My 'own man'?" she repeated with surprise. "Who was the tattletale that told you?" She began to shiver suddenly in mental or physical agony. "Oh, I remember it all now," she gasped. "Was the little boy killed who sat in the corner seat?"

"Why, I don't know," said Drew, and his voice rasped unexpectedly with the sickening strain of the past few hours.

At the sound she gave a panic-stricken sob. "I believe I'm dead myself, Drew," she cried, "and you're trying to keep it from me. Where am I? Tell me instantly where I am."

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Drew's laugh rang out before he could control it. "You're here in your own little room," he assured her.

"Prove it," she whimpered hysterically. "Tell me what's on my bureau."

He jumped up and walked across the room to make sure. "Why, there's a silver-backed mirror, and a box of violet powder, and a package of safety pins."

"Pshaw!" she said. "Those might be on any angel's bureau. What else do you see?"

He fumbled a minute among the glass and silver and gave a quick sigh of surprise. "Here's your wedding ring."

"Bring it to me," she pleaded, and took the tiny golden circlet blindly from his hand and slipped it experimentally once or twice up and down her finger. "Yes, that's it," she assented, and handed it back to him. "Hurry—quick—before anybody comes."

"What do you want?" faltered Drew.

She reached up wilfully and yanked the bandage away from the corner of one eye.

"Why, put the ring back on my finger where it belongs!" she said. "We're going to begin all over again. Play that I am your wife!" she demanded tremulously. [250]

Drew winced like raw flesh. "You are my wife," he cried. "You are! You are! You are!"

With all the strength that was left to her she groped out and drew his face down to her lips.

"Oh, I've invented a lots better game than that," she whispered. "If we're going to play any game at all—let's—play—that—I—love—you!"

HEART OF THE CITY

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HE dining-room was green, as green could be. Under the orange-colored candle-light, the walls, rugs, ceiling, draperies, ferns, glowed verdant, mysterious, intense, like night woods arching round a camp fire. Into this fervid, pastoral verdure the round white table, sparkling with silver, limpid with wine-lights, seemed to roll forth resplendent and incongruous as a huge, tinsel snowball.

Outside, like fire engines running on velvet wheels, the automobiles went humming along the pavement. Inside, the soft, narrow, ribbon voice of a violin came whimpering through the rose-scented air.

It was the midst of dinner-party time. In the oak-paneled hallway a shadowy, tall clock swallowed gutturally on the verge of striking nine.

The moment was distinctly nervous. The *entrée* course was late, and the Hostess, gesticulating tragically to her husband, had slipped one chalky white shoulder just a fraction of an inch too far out of its jeweled strap. The Host, conversing every second with exaggerated blandness about the squirrels in Central Park, was striving frantically all the while with a desperately surreptitious, itchy gesture to signal to his mate. Worse than this, a prominent Sociologist was audibly discussing the American penal system with a worried-looking lady whose brother was even then under indictment for some banking fraud. Some one, trying to kick the Sociologist's ankle bone, had snagged his own foot gashingly through the Woodland Girl's skirt ruffle, and the Woodland Girl, blush-blown yet with country breezes, clear-eyed as a trout pool, sweet-breathed as balsam, was staring panic-stricken around the table, trying to locate the particular man's face that could possibly connect boot-wise with such a horridly profane accident. The sudden, grotesque alertness of her expression attracted the laggard interest of the young Journalist at her left. [254]

"What brought you to New York?" the Journalist asked abruptly. "You're the last victim in from the country, so you must give an account of yourself. Come 'fess up! What brought you to New York?"

The Journalist's smile was at least as conscientious as the smile of daylight down a city airshaft, and the Woodland Girl quickened to the brightening with almost melodramatic delight, for all previous conversational overtures from this neighbor had been about actors that she had never heard of, or operas that she could not even pronounce, and before the man's scrutinizing, puzzled amazement she had felt convicted not alone of mere rural ignorance, but of freckles on her nose. [255]

"What brought me to New York?" she repeated with vehement new courage. "Do you really want to know? It's quite a speech. What brought me to New York? Why, I wanted to see the 'heart of the city.' I'm twenty years old, and I've never in all my life been away from home before. Always and always I've lived in a log bungalow, in a wild garden, in a pine forest, on a green island, in a blue lake. My father is an invalid, you know, one of those people who are a little bit short of lungs but inordinately long of brains. And I know Anglo-Saxon and Chemistry and Hindoo History and Sunrises and Sunsets and Mountains and Moose, and such things. But I wanted to know People. I wanted to know Romance. I wanted to see for myself all this 'heart of the city' that you hear so much about—the great, blood-red, eager, gasping heart of the city. So I came down here last week to visit my uncle and aunt." [256]

Her mouth tightened suddenly, and she lowered her voice with ominous intensity. "But there *isn't* any heart to, your city—no!—there is no heart at all at the center of things—just a silly, pretty, very much decorated heart-shaped box filled with candy. If you shake it hard enough, it may rattle, but it won't throb. And I hate—hate—hate your old city. It's utterly, hopelessly, irremediably jejune, and I'm going home to-morrow!" As she leaned toward the Journalist, the gold locket on her prim, high-necked gown swung precipitously forth like a wall picture in a furious little earthquake.

The Journalist started to laugh, then changed his mind and narrowed his eyes speculatively toward something across the room. "No heart?" he

queried. "No Romance?"



"The lone, accentuated figure of a boy violinist"

The Woodland Girl followed his exploring gaze. Between the plushy green *portières* a dull, cool, rose-colored vista opened forth refreshingly, with a fragment of bookcase, the edge of a stained glass window, the polished gleam of a grand piano, and then—lithe, sinuous, willowy, in the shaded lamplight—the lone, accentuated figure of a boy violinist. In the amazing mellow glow that smote upon his face, the Woodland Girl noted with a crumple at her heart the tragic droop of the boy's dark head, the sluggish, velvet passion of his eyes, the tortured mouth, the small chin fairly worn and burrowed away against his vibrant instrument. And the music that burst suddenly forth was like scalding water poured on ice—seething with anguish, shuddering with ecstasy, flame at your heart, frost at your spine.

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The Girl began to shiver. "Oh, yes, I know," she whispered. "He plays, of course, as though he knew all sorrows by their first names, but that's Genius, isn't it, not Romance? He's such a little lad. He can hardly have experienced much really truly emotion as yet beyond a—stomach ache—or the loss of a Henty book."

"A stomach ache! A Henty book!" cried the Journalist, with a bitter, convulsive sort of mirth. "Well, I'm ready to admit that the boy is scarcely eighteen. But he happens to have lost a wife and a son within the past two months! While some of us country-born fellows of twenty-eight or thirty were asking our patient girls at home to wait even

another year, while we came over to New York and tried our fortunes, this little youngster of scarcely eighteen is already a husband, a father, and a widower.

"He's a Russian Jew—you can see that—and one of our big music people picked him up over there a few months ago and brought him jabberingly to America. But the invitation didn't seem to include the wife and baby—genius and family life aren't exactly guaranteed to develop very successfully together—and right there on the dock at the very last sailing moment the little chap had to choose between a small, wailing family and a great big, clapping New York—just temporarily, you understand, a mere matter of immediate expediency; and families are supposed to keep indefinitely, you know, and keep sweet, too, while everybody knows that New York can go sour in a single night, even in the coldest weather. And just as the youngster was trying to decide, wavering first one way and then the other, and calling on high every moment to the God of all the Russias, the old steamer whistle began to blow, and they rustled him on board, and his wife and the kid pegged back alone to the province where the girl's father lived, and they got snarled up on the way with a band of Cossack soldiers, and the little chap hasn't got any one now even as far off as Russia to hamper his musical career.... So he's playing jig-tunes to people like us that are trying to forget our own troubles, such as how much we owe our tailors or our milliners. But sometimes they say he screams in the night, and twice he has fainted in the midst of a concert.

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"No heart in the city? No Romance? Why, my dear child, this whole city fairly teems with Romance. The automobiles throb with it. The great, roaring elevated trains go hustling full of it. There's Romance—Romance—Romance from dawn to dark, and from dark to dawn again. The sweetness of the day-blooming sunshine, the madness of the night-blooming electric lights, the crowds, the colors, the music, the perfume—why, the city is *Romance-mad!* If you stop anywhere for even half an instant to get your breath, Romance will run right over you. It's whizzing past you in the air. It's whizzing past you in the street. It's whizzing past you in the sensuous, ornate theaters, in the jaded department stores, in the calm, gray churches. Romance?—Love?

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"The only trouble about New York Romance lies just in the fact that it is so whizzingly premature. You've simply got to grab Love the minute before you've made up your mind—because the minute after you've made up your mind, it won't be there. Grab it—or lose it. Grab it—or lose it. That's the whole Heart-Motto of New York. Sinner or Saint—RUSH—RUSH—RUSH—like Hell!"

"Grab it—or lose it. Grab it, or—l-o-s-e it." Like the impish raillery of a tortured devil, the violin's passionate, wheedling tremolo seemed to catch up the phrase, and mouth it and mock it, and tear it and tease it, and kiss it and curse it—and SMASH it at last into a great, screeching crescendo that rent your eardrums like the crash of steel rails.

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With strangely parched lips, the Woodland Girl stretched out her small brown hand to the fragile, flower-stemmed glass, and tasted for the first time in her life the sweetly-sad, molten-gold magic of champagne. "Why, what is it?" she asked, with the wonder still wet on her lips. "Why, what is it?"

The Journalist raised his own glass with staler fingers, and stared for a second through narrowing eyes into the shimmering vintage. "What is it?" he repeated softly. "This particular

brand? The Italians call it '*Lacrymæ Christi*.' So even in our furies and our follies, in our cafés and carousals, in our love and all our laughter—we drink—you see—the—"Tears of Christ." He reached out suddenly and covered the Girl's half-drained glass with a quivering hand. "Excuse me," he stammered. "Maybe—our thirst is partly of the soul; but '*Lacrymæ Christi*' was never meant for little girls like you. *Go back to your woods!*"

Scuttle as it might, the precipitate, naked passion in his voice did not quite have time to cover itself with word-clothes. A little gasping breath escaped. And though the Girl's young life was as shingly empty as an unfinished house, her brain-cells were packed like an attic with all the inherent experiences of her mother's mother's mother, and she flinched instinctively with a great lurch of her heart. [261]

"Oh, let's talk about something—dressy," she begged. "Let's talk about Central Park. Let's talk about the shops. Let's talk about the subway." Her startled face broke desperately into a smile. "Oh, don't you think the subway is perfectly dreadful," she insisted. "There's so much underbrush in it!" Even as she spoke, her shoulders hunched up the merest trifle, and her head pushed forward, after the manner of people who walk much in the deep woods. The perplexity in her eyes spread instantly to her hands. Among the confusing array of knives and forks and spoons at her plate, her fingers began to snarl nervously like a city man's feet through a tangle of blackberry vines.

With a good-natured shrug of his shoulders, the Journalist turned to his more sophisticated neighbor, and left her quite piteously alone once more. An enamored-looking man and woman at her right were talking transmigration of souls, but whenever she tried to annex herself to their conversation they trailed their voices away from her in a sacred, aloof sort of whisper. Across the table the people were discussing city politics in a most clandestine sort of an undertone. Altogether it was almost half an hour before the Journalist remembered to smile at her again. The very first flicker of his lips started her red mouth mumbling inarticulately. [262]

"Were you going to say something?" he asked.

She shook her head drearily. "No," she stammered. "I've tried and tried, but I can't think of anything at all to say. I guess I don't know any secrets."

The Journalist's keen eyes traveled shrewdly for a second round the cautious, worldly-wise table, and then came narrowing back rather quizzically to the Woodland Girl's flushing, pink and white face.

"Oh, I don't know," he smiled. "You look to me like a little girl who might have a good many secrets."

She shook her head. "No," she insisted, "in all the whole wide world I don't know one single thing that has to be whispered."

"No scandals?" teased the Journalist.

"No!"

"No love affairs?"

"No!"

The Journalist laughed. "Why, what do you think about all day long up in your woods?" he quizzed. [263]

"Anglo-Saxon and Chemistry and Hindoo History and Sunsets and Mountains and Moose," she repeated glibly.

"Now you're teasing me," said the Journalist.

She nodded her head delightedly. "I'm trying to!" she smiled.

The Journalist turned part way round in his chair, and proffered her a perfectly huge olive as though it had been a crown jewel. When he spoke again, his voice was almost as low as the voice of the man who was talking transmigration of souls. But his smile was a great deal kinder. "Don't you find any Romance at all in your woods?" he asked a bit drawlingly.

"No," said the Girl; "that's the trouble. Of course, when I was small it didn't make any difference; indeed, I think that I rather preferred it lonesome then. But this last year, somehow, and this last autumn especially—oh, I know you'll think I'm silly—but two or three times in the woods—I've hoped and hoped and hoped—at the turn of a trail, or the edge of a brook, or the scent of a camp fire—that I might run right into a real, live Hunter or Fisherman. And—one night I really prayed about it—and the next morning I got up early and put on my very best little hunting suit—all coats and leggings and things just like yours, you know—and I stayed out all day long—tramping—tramping—tramping, and I never saw *any one*. But I did get a fox. Yes!—and then—" [264]

"And then what?" whispered the Journalist very helpfully.

The Girl began to smile, but her lips were quite as red as a blush. "Well—and—then," she continued softly, "it occurred to me all of a sudden that the probable reason why the Man-Who-Was-Meant-for-Me didn't come was because he—*didn't know I was there!*" She began to laugh,

toying all the while a little bit nervously with her ice-cream fork. "So I thought that perhaps—if I came down to New York this winter—and then went home again, that maybe—not probably you know, but just possibly—some time in the spring or summer—I might look up suddenly through the trees and he *would* be there! But I've been ten days in New York and I haven't seen one single man whom I'd exactly like to meet in the woods—in my little hunting suit."

"Wouldn't you be willing to meet me?" pried the Journalist injudiciously.

The Girl looked up and faltered. "Why, of course," she hurried, "I should be very glad to see you—but I had always sort of hoped that the man whom I met in the woods wouldn't be bald."

The Journalist choked noisily over his salted almonds. His heightened color made him look very angry. [265]

"Oh, I trust I wasn't rude," begged the Woodland Girl. Then as the Journalist's galloping laughter slowed down into the gentlest sort of a single-foot smile, her eyes grew abruptly big and dark with horror. "Why, I never thought of it," she stammered, "but I suppose that what I have just said about the man in the woods and my coming to New York is—'husband hunting.'"

The Journalist considered the matter very carefully. "N—o," he answered at last, "I don't think I should call it 'husband hunting' nor yet, exactly, 'the search for the Holy Grail'; but, really now, I think on the whole I should call it more of a sacrament than a sport."

"O—h," whispered the Girl with a little sigh of relief.

It must have been fully fifteen minutes before the Journalist spoke to her again. Then, in the midst of his salad course, he put down his fork and asked quite inquisitively: "Aren't there any men at all up in your own special Maine woods?"

"Oh, yes," the Girl acknowledged with a little crinkle of her nose, "there's Peter."

"Who's Peter?" he insisted.

"Why, Peter," she explained, "is the Philadelphia boy who tutors with my father in the summers." [266]

Her youthfulness was almost as frank as fever, and, though taking advantage of this frankness seemed quite as reprehensible as taking advantage of any other kind of babbling delirium, the Journalist felt somehow obliged to pursue his investigations.

"Nice boy?" he suggested tactfully.

The Girl's nose crinkled just a little bit tighter.

The Journalist frowned. "I'll wager you two dozen squirrels out of Central Park," he said, "that Peter is head over heels in love with you!"

The Girl's mouth twisted a trifle, but her eyes were absolutely solemn. "I suppose that he is," she answered gravely, "but he's never taken the trouble to tell me so, and he's been with us three summers. I suppose lots of men are made like that. You read about it in books. They want to sew just as long—long—long a seam as they possibly can without tying any knot in the thread. Peter, I know, wants to make perfectly Philadelphia-sure that he won't meet any girl in the winters whom he likes better."

"I think that sort of thing is mighty mean," interposed the Journalist sympathetically.

"Mean?" cried the Girl. "Mean?" Her tousley yellow hair seemed fairly electrified with astonishment, and her big blue eyes brimmed suddenly with uproarious delight. "Oh, of course," she added contritely, "it may be mean for the person who sews the seam, but it's heaps of fun for the cloth, because after awhile, you know, Pompous Peter will discover that there isn't any winter girl whom he likes better, and in the general excitement of the discovery he'll remember only the long, long seam—three happy summers—and forget altogether that he never tied any knot. And then! And then!" her cheeks began to dimple. "And then—just as he begins triumphantly to gather me in—all my yards and yards of beautiful freedom fretted into one short, puckery, worried ruffle—then—Hooray—swish—slip—slide—*out comes the thread*—and Mr. Peter falls right over bump-backward with surprise. Won't it be fun?" [267]

"Fun?" snapped the Journalist. "What a horrid, heartless little cynic you are!"

The Girl's eyebrows fairly tiptoed to reach his meaning. "Cynic?" she questioned. "You surely don't mean that I am a cynic? Why, I think men are perfectly splendid in every possible way that—doesn't matter to a woman. They can build bridges and wage wars, and spell the hardest, homeliest words. But Peter makes life so puzzling," she added wryly. "Everybody wants me to marry Peter; everybody says 'slow but sure,' 'slow but sure.' But it's a lie!" she cried out hotly. "Slow is *not* sure. It is not! It is not! The man who isn't excited enough to *run* to his goal is hardly interested enough to walk. And yet"—her forehead crinkled all up with worry—"and yet—you tell me that 'quick' isn't sure, either. *What is sure?*" [268]

"Nothing!" said the Journalist.

She tossed her head. "All the same," she retorted, "I'd rather have a man propose to me three years before, rather than three years after, I'd made up my mind whether to accept him or not."

"Don't—marry—Peter," laughed the Journalist.

"Why not?" she asked—so very bluntly that the Journalist twisted a bit uneasily.

"Oh—I—don't—know," he answered cautiously. Then suddenly his face brightened. "Any trout fishing up in your brooks about the first of May?" he asked covertly.

Again the knowledge of her mother's mother's mother blazed red-hot in the Girl's cheeks. "Y—e—s," she faltered reluctantly, "the trout-fishing is very generous in May."

"Will Peter be there?" persisted the Journalist.

Her eyes began to shine again with amusement. "Oh, no," she said. "Peter never comes until July." With mock dignity she straightened herself up till her shoulder almost reached the Journalist's. "I was very foolish," she attested, "even to mention Peter, or mankind—at all. Of course, I'm commencing to realize that my ideas about men are exceedingly countrified—'disgustingly countrified,' my aunt tells me. Why, just this last week at my aunt's sewing club I learned that the only two real qualifications for marriage are that a man should earn not less than a hundred dollars a week, and be a perfectly kind hooker."

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"A perfectly kind hooker?" queried the Journalist.

"Why, yes," she said. "Don't you know—now—that all our dresses fasten in the back?" Her little tinkling, giggling laugh rang out with startling incongruity through the formal room, and her uncle glanced at her and frowned with the slightest perceptible flicker of irritation. She leaned her face a wee bit closer to the Journalist. "Now, uncle, for instance," she confided, "is not a particularly kind hooker. He's accurate, you understand, but not exactly kind."

The Journalist started to smile, but instantly her tip-most finger ends brushed across his sleeve. "Oh, please, don't smile any more," she pleaded, "because every time you smile you look so pleasant that some lady sticks out a remark like a hand and grabs you into her own conversation." But the warning came too late. In another moment the Journalist was most horridly involved with the people on his left in a prosy discussion regarding Japanese servants.

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For another interminable length of time the Woodland Girl sat in absolute isolation. Some of the funerals at home were vastly more social, she thought—people at least inquired after the health of the survivors. But now, even after she had shredded all her lettuce into a hundred pieces and bitten each piece twice, she was still quite alone. Even after she had surreptitiously nibbled up all the cracker crumbs around her own plate and the Journalist's plate, she was still quite alone. Finally, in complete despair, she folded her little, brown, ringless hands and sat and stared frankly about her.

Across the sparkly, rose-reeking table a man as polished as poison ivy was talking devotedly to a white-faced Beauty in a most exciting gown that looked for all the world like the Garden of Eden struck by lightning—black and billowing as a thunder cloud, zigzagged with silver, ravished with rose-petals, rain-dropped with pearls. Out of the gorgeous, mysterious confusion of it the Beauty's bare shoulders leaped away like Eve herself fleeing before the storm. But beyond the extravagant sweep of gown and shoulder the primitive likeness ended abruptly in one of those utterly well-bred, worldly-wise, perfected young faces, with that subtle, indescribable sex-consciousness of expression which makes the type that men go mad over, and the type that older women tersely designate as looking just a little bit "too kissed."

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But the Woodland Girl did not know the crumpled-rose-leaf stamp of face which characterizes the coquette. Utterly fascinated, tremulous with excitement, heartsick with envy, she reached out very softly and knocked with her finger on the Journalist's plate to beg readmission to his mind.

"Oh, who is that beautiful creature?" she whispered.

"Adele Reitzen," said the Journalist, "your uncle's ward."

"My own uncle's ward?" The Woodland Girl gave a little gasp. "But why does she worry so in her eyes every now and then?" she asked abruptly.

Even as she asked, Adele Reitzen began to cough. The trouble started with a trivial clearing of her throat, caught up a disjointed swallow or two, and ended with a rack that seemed to rip like a brutal knife right across her silver-spangled lungs. Somebody patted her on the back. Somebody offered her a glass of water. But in the midst of the choking paroxysm she asked to be excused for a moment and slipped away to the dressing-room. The very devoted man seemed rather piteously worried by the incident, and the Hostess looked straight into his eyes and shook her head ominously.

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"I hope you are planning a southern wedding trip next week," she said. "I don't like that cough of Adele's. I've sat at three dinner parties with her this week, and each individual night she has had an attack like this and been obliged to leave the table."

In the moment's lull, the butler presented a yellow telegram on a shiny, Sheffield tray, and the Hostess slipped her pink fingers rustlingly through the envelope and brightened instantly. "Oh, here's a surprise for you, Chloe," she called to the Woodland Girl. "Peter is coming over to-night to see you." Like a puckering electric tingle the simple announcement seemed to run through the room, and a little wise, mischievous smile spread from face to face among the guests. In another instant everybody turned and peeped at the Woodland Girl, and the Woodland Girl felt her good

cool, red blood turn suddenly to bubbling, boiling water, and steam in horrid, clammy wetness across her forehead and along the prickling palms of her hands, and the Journalist laughed right out loud, and the whole green, definite room swam dizzily like the flaunting scarlet messiness of a tropical jungle.

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Every nook and corner of the house, indeed, was luxuriously heated, but when Adele Reitzen came sauntering back to her seat, pungent around her, telltale as an alien perfume, lurked the chill, fresh aroma of the wintry, blustering street. Only the country girl's smothering lungs noted the astonishing fact. Like a little caged animal scenting the blessed outdoors, her nostrils began to crinkle, and she straightened up with such abrupt alertness that she loomed to Adele Reitzen's startled senses like the only visible person at the table, and for just the fraction of a heart-beat the two girls fathomed down deep and understandingly into each other's eyes, before Adele Reitzen fluttered her white lids with a little piteous gesture of appeal.

Breathlessly the Woodland Girl turned to the Journalist, and touched his arm. "New York *is* interesting, isn't it!" she stammered. "I've decided just this minute to stay another week."

"Oh, ho," said the Journalist. "So you love it better than you did an hour ago?"

"No!" cried the Woodland Girl. "I love it worse. I love it worse every moment like a—ghost story, but I'm going to stick it out a week longer and see how it ends. And I've learned one clue to New York's plot this very night. I've learned that most every face is a 'haunted house.' The mouths slam back and forth all the time like pleasant doors, and the jolliest kind of speeches come prancing out, and all that—but in the eyes ghosts are peering out the windows every minute."

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"Cheerful thought," said the Journalist, taking off his glasses. "Who's the ghost in my eyes?"

The Woodland Girl stared at him wonderingly. "The ghost in your eyes?" she blundered. "Why—I guess—it's 'the patient girl at home' whom you asked to wait 'even another year.'"

Like two fever spots the red flared angrily on the Journalist's cheek bones.

Not even the Journalist spoke to her again.

Finally, lonesome as a naughty child, she followed the dozen dinner guests back into the huge drawing-room, and wandered aimlessly around through the incomprehensible mysteries of Chinese idols and teakwood tabourets and soft, mushy Asiatic rugs. Then at last, behind a dark, jutting bookcase, in a corner most blissfully safe and secret like a cave, she stumbled suddenly upon a great, mottled leopard skin with its big, humpy head, and its sad glass eyes yearning out to her reproachfully. As though it had been a tiny, lost kitten, she gave a wee gasp of joy, and dropped down on the floor and tried to cuddle the huge, felt-lined, fur bulk into her lap. Just as the clumsy face flopped across her knees, she heard the quick swish of silk, and looked up to see Adele Reitzen bending over her.

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The older girl's eyes were tortured with worry, and her white fingers teased perpetually at the jeweled watch on her breast. "Chloe Curtis," she whispered abruptly, "will you do something for me? Would you be afraid? You are visiting here in the house, so no one would question your disappearance. Will you go up to the dressing-room—quick—and get my black evening coat—the one with the gold embroidery and the big hood—and go out to the street corner where the cars stop—and tell the man who is waiting there—that I couldn't—simply couldn't—get out again? Would you be afraid?"

The Woodland Girl jumped to her feet. At that particular instant the lump in her throat seemed the only really insurmountable obstacle in the whole wide world. "Would I be afraid?" she scoffed. "Afraid of what? Of New York? Of the electric lights? Of the automobiles? Of the cross policemen? Afraid of nothing!" Her voice lowered suddenly. "Is it—Love?" she whispered.

The older girl's face was piteous to see. "Y—e—s," she stammered. "It is Love."

The Woodland Girl's eyes grew big with wonder. "But the other man?" she gasped. "You are going to be married next week!"

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Adele Reitzen's eyes blurred. "Yes," she repeated, "I am going to be married next week." A little shiver went flickering across her shoulders.

The Woodland Girl's heart began to plunge and race. "What's the matter with the man out on the street corner?" she asked nervously.

Adele Reitzen caught her breath. "He's a civil engineer," she said. "His name is Brian Baird. He's just back from Central America. I met him on the steamer once. He was traveling second cabin. My—family—won't—let—me—have—him."

The Woodland Girl threw back her head and laughed, and smothered her laugh contritely with her hand. "Your family won't let you have him?" she mumbled. "What a funny idea! What has your family got to do about it?" Her breath began to quicken, and she reached out suddenly and clutched Adele Reitzen's shoulder. "Do you know where my uncle's musty old law library is?" she hurried. "It's downstairs, you know, close to the store room—nobody ever uses it. You go down there just as fast as you possibly can, and wait there, and I'll be back in five minutes with the—Love Man."

Before Adele Reitzen's feeble courage could protest, the Woodland Girl was scurrying up the short flight to the dressing-room and pawing like a prankish terrier through the neatly folded evening coats that snuggled across the bed. Tingling with excitement, she arrayed herself finally in the luxuriantly muffling black and gold splendor, and started cautiously down the long, creaky front stairs.

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Like the inimitable, familiar thrill of little wild, phosphorescent eyes looming suddenly out of the black night-woods at home, the adventure challenged her impetuous curiosity. Bored puzzlingly by the big city's utter inability to reproduce the identical, simple lake-and-forest emotionalism that was the breath of life to her, she quickened now precipitately to the possible luring mystery in human eyes. Through the dark mahogany stripes of the balustrade, the drawing-room candles flared and sputtered like little finger-pinches of fluid flame, and the violin's shuddering voice chased after her, taunting, "Hurry! Hurry! Or it won't be there!" Beyond the lights and music, and the friendly creaking stairs, the strange black night opened forth like the scariest sort of a bottomless pit; but as yet, in all the girl's twenty coltish years nothing except headache and heart-beat had ever made her feel perfectly throbbing-positive that she was alive. She could spare the headache, but she could not spare the heart-beat. Paddling with muscle-strained shoulder and heaving breast across a November-tortured lake, or huddling under forbidden pine trees in a rackety August thunder storm, or floundering on broken snowshoes into the antlered presence of an astounded moose—Fun and Fear were synonymous to her.

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Once on the street, like water to thirst, the cold night air freshened and vivified her. Over her head the electric lights twinkled giddily like real stars. On either side of her the huge, hulking houses reared up like pleasant imitation mountains. Her trailing cloak slipped now and then from her clutching fingers, but she trudged along toward the corner with just one simple, supreme sense of pleasurable excitement—somewhere out of the unfathomed shadows a real, live Adventure was going to rise up and scare her.

But the man, when he came, did not scare her one hundredth part as much as she scared him, though he jumped at her from the snuggling fur robe of a stranded automobile, and snatched at her arm with an almost bruising intensity.

"Oh, Adele," he cried huskily, "I thought you had failed me again."

The Woodland Girl threw back her somber hood and stood there all blonde and tousle-haired and astonishing under the electric light. "I'm not your Adele," she explained breathlessly. "I'm just Chloe Curtis. Adele sent me out to tell you that she absolutely couldn't—couldn't come. You yourself would have seen that it was horridly impossible. But you are to go back to the house now with me—to my uncle's old unused library and see Adele yourself for as much as fifteen minutes. No one—oh, I'm sure that no one—could persuade a woman to be brave—on a street corner; but I think that perhaps if you had a chance to see Adele all alone, she would be very—extraordinarily brave."

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Anger, resentment, confusion, dismay flared like successive explosions in the man's face, and faded again, leaving his flesh utter ash gray.

"It was plucky of you to come," he muttered grimly, "but I haven't quite reached the point yet—thank you—where I go sneaking round people's unused rooms to meet any one!"

"Is it so very different from sneaking round street corners?" said the Woodland Girl.

The man's head lifted proudly. "I don't go 'sneaking' round street corners," he answered simply. "All Outdoors *belongs* to me! But I won't go secretly to any house that doesn't welcome me."

The Woodland Girl began to stamp her foot. "But the house does welcome you," she insisted. "It's my visity-house, and you are to come there as my friend."

In her ardor she turned and faced him squarely under the light, and winced to see how well worth facing he was—for the husband of a coward. There was no sleek New York about him, certainly, but rather the merge of all cities and many countries, a little breath of unusualness, a touch of mystery, a trifling suggestion, perhaps, of more dusty roads than smug pavements, twenty-eight or thirty years, surely, of adventurous youth. Impulsively she put out her hand to him. "Oh, please come," she faltered. "I—think you are so nice."

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With a little laugh that had no amusement in it, nor pleasure, nor expectation, nor any emotion that the Woodland Girl had ever experienced, he stood and stared at her with some sudden impulse. "Does Adele really want me to come?" he asked trenchantly.

"Why yes," insisted the Woodland Girl. "It's life or death for you and Adele."

Ten minutes later, standing on guard at the edge of the library door, the Woodland Girl heard, for the first time in her life, the strange, low, vibrant, mysterious mate-tone of a human voice. If she had burrowed her head in a dozen pillows, she could not have failed to sense the amazing wonder of the sound, though the clearer-worded detail of hurried plans and eager argument and radiant acquiescence passed by her unobserved. "But I must be perfectly sure that you love me," persisted the man's voice.

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"You and—you only," echoed the woman's passion.

Then suddenly, like a practical joke sprung by a half-witted Fate, the store room door opened with casual, exploring pleasantness, and the Journalist and Adele Reitzen's promised husband and big Peter himself stepped out into the hallway.

Before the surprised greeting in two men's faces the Woodland Girl retreated step by step, until at last with a quick turn she whirled back into the dingy, gas-lit library—her chalky face, her staring eyes proclaiming only too plainly the calamity which she had no time to stuff into words.

Close behind her followed the three smiling, unsuspecting intruders. Even then the incident might have passed without gross awkwardness if the Woodland Girl's uncle and aunt had not suddenly joined the company. From the angry, outraged flush on the two older faces it was perfectly evident that these two, at least, had been waylaid by kitchen gossip.

Brian Baird laughed. Like a manly lover goaded and hectored and cajoled too long into unworthy secrecy, his pulses fairly jumped to meet the frank, forced issue. But with a quick, desperate appeal Adele Reitzen silenced the triumphant speech on his lips. "Let me manage it!" she whispered, so vehemently that the man yielded to her, and stepped back against the fireplace, and spread his arms with studied, indolent ease along the mantel, like a rustic cross tortured out of a supple willow with. One of his hands played teasingly with a stale spray of Christmas greens. Nothing but the straining, white-knuckled grip of his other hand modified the absolute, wilful insolence of his pose.

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As for Adele, her face was ghastly.

With crude, uncontrolled venom the Woodland Girl's aunt plunged into the emergency. "Adele," she cried shrilly, "I think you owe your *fiancé* an explanation! You promised us faithfully last year that you would never, never see Mr. Baird again—and now to-night our chauffeur saw you steal out to the street corner to meet him—like a common shop-girl. And you dare to bring him back—to my house! What have you to say for yourself?"

For the fraction of a moment Adele Reitzen's superb beauty straightened up to its full majestic height, and all the love-pride that was in her white, white flesh flamed gloriously in her face. Then her sleek, prosperous, arrogant city lover stepped suddenly forward where the yellow light struck bleakly across his shrewd, small eyes and his thin, relentless mouth.

"I should be very glad, indeed, to hear what you have to say," he announced, and his voice was like a nicked knife blade.

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Flush by flush by flush the red glory fled from Adele Reitzen's face. Her throat began to flutter. Her knees crumpled under her. Fear went over her like a gray fog.

With one despairing hand she reached back to the Woodland Girl. "Oh, tell them it was you," she whispered hotly. "Oh, tell them it was you." Her scared face brightened viciously. "It was you—you know! Tell them—oh, tell them anything—only save me!"

The Woodland Girl's eyes were big with horror. She started to speak, she started to protest, but before the jumbled words could leave her lips Adele Reitzen turned to the others and blurted out hysterically:

"Surely I can't be expected to keep even a love-secret under these—distressing circumstances. *It was Chloe who went out to the street corner to-night—like a common shop-girl—to meet Brian Baird. She wore my cloak on purpose to disguise her.*"

Like the blaring scream of a discordant trumpet, the treacherous, flatted truth crashed into the Woodland Girl's startled senses, and the man in the shape of a sagging willow cross started up and cried out, "My God!"

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For a second the Woodland Girl stood staring into his dreadful, chaotic face, then she squared her shoulders and turned to meet the wrathful, contemptuous surprise in her uncle's and aunt's features.

"So it was you," sneered the uncle, "embroiling our decent household in a common, vulgar intrigue?"

"So it was you," flamed her aunt, "you who have been posing all these days as an Innocent?"

Frantic with perplexity, muddled with fear, torn by conflicting chivalries, the Woodland Girl stared back and forth from Adele Reitzen's agonized plea to the grim, inscrutable gleam in Brian Baird's eyes. As though every living, moving verb had been ripped out of that night's story, and all the inflexible nouns were printing themselves slam-bang one on top of another—Roses, Wine, Music, Silver, Diamonds, Fir-Balsam telescoped each other in her senses.

"Your father sent you down here," persisted her aunt brutally, "on the private plea to me that he was planning to be married again—but I can readily see that perhaps no one would exactly want you."

The Woodland Girl's heart began to pound.

"We—are—waiting," prodded her uncle's icy voice.

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Suddenly the Girl's memory quickened. Once, long ago, her father had said to her: "Little Daughter, if you are ever in fear and danger by sea or land—or city, which is neither sea nor land

—turn always to that man, and to that man only, whom you would trust in the deep woods. Put your imagination to work, not your reason. You have no reason!"

Desperately she turned to Peter. His face, robbed utterly of its affection, was all a-shock with outraged social proprieties, merging the merest bit unpleasantly into the racy appreciation of a unique adventure. Panic-stricken, she turned to the Journalist. Already across the Journalist's wine-flushed face the pleasant, friendly smile was souring into worldly skepticism and mocking disillusionment.

She shut her eyes. "O Big Woods, help me!" she prayed. "O Cross Storm, warn me! O Rough Trail, guide me!"

Behind her tightly scrunched lids her worried brain darkened like a jumbled midnight forest. Jaded, bedraggled, aching with storm and terror, she saw herself stumbling into the sudden dazzling splurge of a stranger's camp fire. Was it a man like Peter? Was it the Journalist? She began to shiver. Then her heart gave a queer, queer jump, and she opened her eyes stark wide and searched deep into Brian Baird's livid face. One of his hands still strained at the wooden mantel. The other still bruised the pungent balsam tip between its restive fingers. His young hair was too gray about his temples. His shoulders were too tired with life's pack burdens. His eyes had probably grown more bitter that night than any woman's lips could ever sweeten again. And yet—

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Down from the far-away music room floated the quavering, passionate violin wail of the boy who had dared to temporize with Fate. Up from the close-nudging street crashed the confusing slap of hoofs and the mad whirl of wheels racing not so much for the Joy of the Destination as for the Thrill of the Journey. She gave a little gasping sob, and Brian Baird stooped forward incredulously, as though from the yellow glare of his camp fire he had only just that instant sensed the faltering footfall of a wayfarer in acute distress, and could scarcely distinguish even yet through the darkness the detailed features of the apparition.

For a second, startled eyes defied startled eyes, and then suddenly, out of his own meager ration of faith or fortune or immediate goodness, the man straightened up, and *smiled*—the simple, honest, unquestioning camp-fire smile—the smile of food and blanket, the smile of welcome, the smile of shelter, the signal of the gladly-shared crust—and the Woodland Girl gave a low, wild cry of joy, and ran across the room to him, and wheeled back against him, close, tight, with her tousled hair grazing his haggard cheek and her brown hands clutching hard at the sweep of his arms along the mantel.

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"Adele Reitzen is right," she cried out triumphantly. "This is my—man!"

THE PINK SASH

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One man could have asked the question more simply. The whole gaunt, gigantic Rocky Mountain landscape seemed indeed most peculiarly conducive to simple emotions.

Yet Donas Guthrie's original remark had been purely whimsical and distinctly apropos of nothing at all. The careless knocking of his pipe against the piazza's primitive railing had certainly not prepared the way for any particularly vital statement.

"Up—to—the—time—he's—thirty," drawled the pleasant, deep, distinctly masculine voice, "up—to—the—time—he's—thirty, no man has done the things that he's really wanted to do—but only the things that happened to come his way. He's forced into business to please his father, and cajoled into the Episcopal Church to gratify his mother, and bullied into red neckties to pacify his sister Isabel. But once having reached the grown-up, level-headed, utterly independent age of thirty, a man's a fool, I tell you, who doesn't sit down deliberately, and roll up his sleeves, and square his jaw, and list out, one by one, the things that *he* wants in the presumable measure of lifetime that's left him—and go ahead and get them!"

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"Why, surely," said the young woman, without the slightest trace of surprise. Something in her matter-of-fact acquiescence made Donas Guthrie smile a trifle shrewdly.

"Oh! So you've got your own list all made out?" he quizzed. Around the rather tired-looking corners of Esther Davidson's mouth the tiniest possible flicker of amusement began to show.

"No, not all made out," she answered frankly. "You see, I wasn't thirty—until yesterday."

Stooping with cheerful unconcern to blow a little fluff of tobacco ash from his own khaki-colored knees to hers, Guthrie eyed her delightedly from under his heavy brows.

"Oh, this is working out very neatly and pleasantly," he mused, all agrin. "Ever since you joined our camping party at Laramie, jumping off the train as white-faced and out of breath as though you'd been running to catch up with us all the way from Boston—indeed, ever since you first

wrote me at Morristown, asking full particulars about the whole expedition and begging us to go to the Sierra Nevadas instead and blotted 'Sierra' twice and crossed it out once—and then in final petulance spelled it with three 'r's,' I've been utterly consumed with curiosity to know just how old you are."

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"Thirty years—and one morning," said the young woman—absent-mindedly.

"W-h-e-w!" gasped Guthrie. "But that's a ripe old age! Surely, you've no time to lose!"

Rummaging through his pockets with mock intensity he thrust into her hands, at last, a small pad of paper and a pencil.

"Now quick!" he insisted. "Make out your list before it's too late to profit by it!"

The woman was evidently perfectly willing to comply with every playful aspect of his mood, but it was equally evident that she did not intend to be hurried about it. Quite perversely she began to dally with the pencil.

"But, you see, I don't know exactly just what kind of a list you mean," she protested.

"Oh, shucks!" laughed the man. "Here, give me the paper! Now—head it like this: 'I, Esther Davidson, spinster, *æ.t.* thirty years and a few minutes over, do hereby promise and attest that no matter how unwilling to die I may be when my time comes, I shall, at least, not feel that life has defrauded me if I have succeeded in achieving and possessing the following brief list of experiences and substances.' There!" he finished triumphantly. "Now do you see how easy and business-like it all is? Just the plainest possible rating of the things you'd like to have before you're willing to die."

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Cautiously Esther Davidson took the paper from his hand and scanned it with slow-smiling eyes.

"The—things—I'd—like to have—before I'm—willing—to—die," she mused indolently. Then suddenly into her placid face blazed an astonishing flame of passion that vanished again as quickly as it came. "My God!" she said. "The things I've *got* to have before I'm willing to die!"

Stretching the little paper taut across her knees, she began to scribble hasty, impulsive words and phrases, crossing and recrossing, making and erasing, now frowning fiercely down on the unoffending page, now staring off narrow-eyed and smilingly speculative into the blue-green spruce tops.

It was almost ten minutes before she spoke again. Then: "How do you spell amethyst?" she asked meditatively.

The man gave a groan of palpable disgust. "Oh, I say," he reproached her. "You're not playing fair! This was to be a really *bona fide* statement you know."

Without looking up the young woman lifted her hand and gesticulated across the left side of her mannish, khaki-colored flannel shirt.

"Cross my heart!" she affirmed solemnly. "This is a perfectly 'honest-injun' list!"

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Then she tore up everything she had written and began all over again, astonishingly slowly, astonishingly neatly, on a fresh sheet of paper.

"Of course, at first," she explained painstakingly, "you think there are just about ten thousand things that you've simply got to have, but when you really stop to sort them out, and pick and choose a bit, and narrow them all down to actual essentials; narrow them all down to just the 'Passions of the Soul,' as it were, why, then, there really aren't so many after all! Only one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight," she counted on her fingers. "At first, for instance," she persisted frankly, "it seemed to me that I could never, never die happy until I had possessed a very large—oh, I mean an inordinately large amethyst brooch that simply wallowed in pearls, but honestly now as a real treasure-trove, I can see that I'd infinitely rather be able to remember that once upon a time I'd—stroked a lion's face; just one, long, slow, soft-furred, yellow stroke from the brown-pink tip of his nose to the extremest shaggy end of his mane—and he hadn't bitten me!"

"My Heavens!" gasped the man. "Are you crazy? What kind of a list have you been making out anyway?"

A little acridly she thrust both her list and her hands into the side pockets of her riding skirt.

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"What kind of a list did you think I would make out?" she asked sharply. "Something all about machinery? And getting a contract for city paving stones? Or publicly protesting the new football rules? Goodness! Does it have to be a 'wise' list? Does it have to be a worthy list? Something that would really look commendable in a church magazine? This was all your idea, you know! You asked me, didn't you, to write out, just for fun, the things I'd got to have before I'd be willing to die?"

"Oh, come now," laughed the man. "Please don't get stuffy about it. You surprised me so about stroking the lion's face that I simply had to chaff you a little. Truly, I care a great deal about seeing that list. When you got off the train that day it rattled me a confounded lot to see that your camping togs were cut out of exactly the same piece of cloth that mine were. Professor Ellis and

his wife and Doctor Andrews jollied me a good bit about it in fact, but—hang it all—it's beginning to dawn on me rather cozily, though I admit still embarrassingly, that maybe your mind and mine are cut out of the same piece of cloth, too. Please let me see what you've written!"

With a grimace that was half reluctance, half defiance, the young woman pulled the paper from her pocket, smoothed it out on her knees for an instant and handed it to him.

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"Oh, very well, then," she said. "Help yourself to the only authentic list of my 'Heart's Desires.'" Then suddenly her whole face brightened with amusement and she shook a sun-browned finger threateningly at him. "Now remember," she warned him, "I don't have to justify this list, no matter how trivial it sounds, no matter how foolish even; it is excuse enough for it—it is dignity enough for it, that it happens to be so."

"Yes, surely," acknowledged the man.

Either consciously or unconsciously—then—he took off his battered slouch hat and placed it softly on the seat beside him. The act gave the very faintest possible suggestion of reverence to the joke. Then, rather slowly and hesitatingly, after the manner of a man who is not specially accustomed to reading aloud, he began:



"Things That I, Esther Davidson, Am Really Obligated to Have Before I'm Willing to Die: No. 1. A solid summer of horseback riding on a rusty brown pony among really scary mountains. No. 2. A year's work at Oxford in Social Economics. No. 3. One single, solitary sunset view of the Bay of Naples. No. 4. A very, very large oil-painting portrait of a cloud—a great white, warm, cotton-batting looking, summer Sunday afternoon sort of a cloud—I mean; the kind that you used to see as a child when all 'chock full' of chicken and ice cream and serene thoughts about Heaven, you lay stretched out flat on the cool green grass and stared right up into the face of God, and never even guessed what made you blink so. No. 5. The ability to buy one life-saving surgical operation for some one who probably wouldn't otherwise have afforded it. No. 6. A perfectly good dinner. No. 7. A completely happy Christmas. No. 8. A pink sash. That's all."

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"Is—a—pink—sash—exactly a—a—passion?"

With really terrifying gravity, the man put down the finished page and lifted his searching

eyes to the woman's flushing, self-conscious face.

"Is—a—pink—sash—exactly a—a—passion?" he probed in much perplexity.

"Oh, yes!" nodded the young woman briskly. "Oh, yes, indeed! It's an obsession in my life. It's a groove in my brain. In the middle of the night I wake and find myself sitting bolt upright in bed saying it. The only time I ever took ether I prattled persistently concerning it. When a Spring sunshine is so marvelous that it makes me feel faint, when the Vox Humana stop in a church-organ snarls my heart-strings like an actual hand, when the great galloping, tearing fire-engine horses come clanging like mad around the street corner, it's the one definite idea that explodes in my consciousness. It began way back when I was a tiny six-year-old child at a Maine woods 'camp meeting.' Did you ever see a really primitive 'camp meeting'? All fir-balsam trees and little rustic benches and pink calicoes and Grand Army suits and high cheek-bones and low insteps and—lots of noise? Rather inspiring too, sometimes, or at least soul excitative. It might do a good deal to any high-strung six-year-old kiddie. Anyway, I saw the old village drunkard jump up and wave his arms and wail ingenuously: 'I want to be a Christian!' And a palsied crone beside me moaned and sobbed 'I want to be baptized!' And even my timid, gentle mother leaped impetuously to her feet and announced quite publicly to every one 'I want to be washed in the Blood of the Lamb!' And all about me I saw frenzied neighbors and strangers dashing about making these uncontrollable, confidential proclamations. And suddenly, to my meager, indefinite baby-brain, there rushed such an exultancy of positive personal conviction that my poor little face must have been literally transfigured with it, for my father lifted me high to his tight-coated shoulders and cried out ecstatically: 'A little child shall lead them! Hear! Hear!' And with an emphasis on the personal pronoun which I hate to remember even at this remote date, I screamed forth at the top of my lungs: 'I want—a pink sash!'"

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"And didn't you get it?" said Donas Guthrie.

The young woman crooked one eyebrow rather comically. "N-o," she said, "I never got it!"

"But you could get it any time now," argued the man.

Helplessly she threw out the palms of her hands and the unexpected gesture displayed an amazing slimness and whiteness of wrist.

"Stupid!" she laughed. "What would I do with a pink sash now?" Ruthlessly her quick eyes traveled down the full length of her scant, rough skirt to the stubbed toes of her battered brown riding boots. "Dust on the highway and chalk in the classroom and 'grown-up-ness' everywhere!" she persisted dully. "That's the real tragedy of growing up—not that we outgrow our original desires, but that retaining those desires, we outgrow the ability to find satisfaction in them. People ought to think of that, you know, when they thwart a child's ten-cent passion for a tin trumpet. Fifty years later, when that child is a bank president, it may drive him almost crazy to have a toy-shop with a whole window-full of tin trumpets come and cuddle right next door to his bank—and nothing that the man can do with them!"

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Like a little gray veil the tired look fell again over her face. The man saw it and shuddered.

"Psychology is my subject at Varndon College, you know," she continued listlessly, "and so I suppose I'm rather specially interested in freakish mental things. Anyway—pink sashes or Noah's arks or enough sugar in your cocoa—I have a theory that no child ever does outgrow its ungratified legitimate desires; though subsequent maturity may bring him to the point where his original desire has reached such astounding proportions that the original object can no longer possibly appease it."

Reminiscently, her narrowing eyes turned back their inner vision to the far-away grotesque incident of the camp meeting. "It isn't as though a child asked for a thing the very first time that he thought of it," she protested a trifle pathetically. "An idea has been sown and has grown and germinated in his mind a pretty long time before he gets up his courage to speak to anybody about it. Oh, I tell you, sir, the time to grant anybody a favor is the day the favor is asked, for that day is the one psychological moment of the world when supply and demand are keyed exactly to each other's limits, and can be mated beatifically to grow old, or die young, together. But after that day—!"

"Why, even with grown people," she added hastily. "Did you ever know a marriage to turn out to be specially successful where the man had courted a reluctant woman for years and years before she finally yielded to him? It's perfectly astonishing how soon a wife like that is forced to mourn: 'Why did he court me so long and so furiously if he really cared as little as this? I'm just exactly the same person that I was in the beginning!'—Yes, that's precisely the trouble. In the long time that she has kept her man waiting, she has remained just exactly the same small object that she was in the beginning, but the man's hunger for her has materialized and spiritualized and idealized a thousandfold beyond her paltry capacity to satisfy it."

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"That's a funny way to look at it," mused Donas Guthrie.

"Is it?" said the young woman, a trifle petulantly. "It doesn't seem funny to me!"

Then to Guthrie's infinite astonishment and embarrassment the tears welled up suddenly into her eyes and she turned her head abruptly away and began to beat a nervous tattoo with one hand on the flimsy piazza railing.

In the moment's awkward silence that ensued, the little inn's clattery kitchen wafted up its pleasant, odorous, noon-day suggestion of coffee and bacon.

"W-h-e-w!" gloated Guthrie desperately, "but that smells good!"

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"It doesn't smell good to me," said the young woman tartly.

With a definite thud the tilting leg of Guthrie's chair came whacking down on the piazza floor.

"Why, you inconsistent little gourmand!" he exclaimed. "Then why did you give 'one perfectly good dinner' a place on your list of necessities?"

"I don't know," whispered the young woman, a trifle tremulously. Then abruptly she burst out laughing, and the face that she turned to Guthrie again was all deliciously mussed up like a child's, with tears and smiles and breeze-blown wisps of hair.

"That dinner item was just another silly thing," she explained half bashfully, half defiantly. "It's only that although I practically never eat much of anything on ordinary occasions, whenever I get into any kind of danger, whenever the train runs off the track, or the steamer threatens to sink, or my car gets stuck in the subway, I'm seized with the most terrific gnawing hunger—as though—as though—" Furiously the red flushed into her face again. "Well—eternity sounds so l-long," she stammered, "and I have a perfect horror, somehow—of going to Heaven—on an empty stomach."

In mutual appreciation of a suddenly relaxed tension, the man's laughter and the woman's rang out together throughout the dooryard and startled a grazing pony into a whimpering whinny of sympathy.

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"I knew you'd think my list was funny," protested the young woman. "I knew perfectly well that every single individual item on it would astonish you."

Meditatively Donas Guthrie refilled his pipe and evidently illuminated both the tobacco and the situation with the same match.

"It isn't the things that are on your list that astonish me," he remarked puffingly. "It's the things that aren't on it that have given me the bit of a jolt."

"Such as what?" frowned the young woman, sliding jerkily out to the edge of her chair.

"Why, I'd always supposed that women were inherently domestic," growled Guthrie. "I'd always somehow supposed that Love and Home would figure pretty largely on any woman's 'List of Necessities.' But you! For Heaven's sake, haven't you ever even thought of man in any specific relation to your own life?"

"No, except in so far as he might retard my accomplishment of the things on my list," she answered frankly. Out of the gray film of pipe-smoke, her small face loomed utterly serene, utterly honest, utterly devoid of coquetry or self-consciousness.

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"Any man would be apt to 'retard' your desire to stroke a lion's face," said Guthrie grimly. "But then," with a flicker of humor, "but then I see you've omitted that item from your revised list. Your only thought about man then," he continued slowly, "is his probable tendency to interfere with your getting the things out of life that you most want."

"Yes."

"Oh, this is quite a novel idea to me," said Guthrie, all a-smile again. "You mean then—if I judge your premises correctly—you mean then that if on the contrary you found a man who would really facilitate the accomplishment of your 'heart's desires,' you'd be willing to think a good deal about him?"

"Oh, yes!" said the young woman.

"You mean then," persisted Guthrie, "you mean then, just for the sake of the argument, that if I, for instance, could guarantee for you every single little item on this list, you'd be willing to marry even me?"

"Yes."

Altogether unexpectedly Guthrie burst out laughing.

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Instantly a little alarmed look quickened in the young woman's sleepy eyes. "Does it seem cold-blooded to you?" she asked anxiously.

"No, not exactly 'cold' blooded, but certainly a little cooler blooded than any man would have dared to hope for," smiled Guthrie.

The frowning perplexity deepened in the young woman's face. "You surely don't misunderstand me?" she pleaded. "You don't think I'm mercenary or anything horrid like that? Suppose I do make a man's aptitude for gratifying my eight particular whims the supreme test of his marital attractiveness for me—it's not, you must understand, by the sign of his material ability in the matter that I should recognize the Man Who Was Made for Me—but by the sign of his spiritual willingness."

"O—h!" said Guthrie very leisurely. Then, with a trifle more vigor, he picked up the small list again and scanned it carefully.

"It—wouldn't—be—such—a hard—list to—fulfil!" he resumed presently. "'A summer in the mountains?' You're having that now. 'Oxford?' 'Glimpse of Naples?' 'Cloud Picture?' 'Surgical Operation?' 'Pink Sash?' 'Good Dinner?' 'Christmas?' Why there's really nothing here that I couldn't provide for you, myself, if you'd only give me time."

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With mischievous unconcern he smiled at the young woman. With equally mischievous unconcern the young woman smiled back at him.

"What an extraordinary conversation we've had this morning," she said. As though quite exhausted by the uniqueness of it, she slid a little further down into her seat and turned her cheek against the firm support of the chair-back.

"What an extraordinary understanding it has brought us to!" exclaimed the man, scanning her closely.

"I don't see anything particularly—understandy about it," denied the young woman wearily.

It was then that Donas Guthrie asked his simple question, boring his khaki-colored elbows into his khaki-colored knees.

"Little Psychology Teacher," he said very gently, "Little Psychology Teacher, Dr. Andrews says that you've got typhoid fever. He's feared it now for some time, and you know it's against his orders—your being up to-day. So as long as I've proved myself here and now, by your own test, the Man-Whom-You-Were-Looking-For, I suggest that you and I be—married this afternoon—before that itinerant shiny-shouldered preacher out in the corral escapes us altogether—and then we'll send the rest of the party on about their business, and you and Dr. Andrews and Hanlon's Mary and I will camp right down here where we are—and scrap the old typhoid fever to its finish. Will you, Little Psychology Teacher?"

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Lifting her white hands to her throbbing temples the young woman turned her astonished face jerkily toward him.

"What—did—you—say?" she gasped.

"I said: 'Will you marry me this afternoon?'" repeated Guthrie.

Bruskly she pushed that part of the phrase aside. "What did you really say?" she insisted. "What did Dr. Andrews say?"

"Dr. Andrews says that you've got typhoid fever," repeated Guthrie.

Inertly she blinked her big brown eyes for an instant. Then suddenly her hands went groping out to the arms of her chair. Her face was horror-stricken. "Why didn't he tell me, himself?"

"Because I asked him to let me tell you," said Guthrie quietly.

"When did he tell you?" she persisted.

"Just before I came up on the piazza," said Guthrie.

"How did he tell you?" she demanded.

"How did he tell me?" mused Guthrie wretchedly. After all, underneath his occasional whimsicality he was distinctly literal-minded. "How did he tell me? Why I saw them all powwowing together in the corral, and Andrews looked up sort of queer and said: 'Say, Guthrie, that little Psychology friend of yours has got typhoid fever. What in thunder are we going to do?'"

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The strained lines around Esther Davidson's mouth relaxed for a second.

"Well, what in thunder am I going to do?" she joked heroically. But the effort at flippancy was evidently quite too much for her. In another instant her head pitched forward against the piazza railing and her voice, when she spoke again, was almost indistinguishable.

"And you knew all this an hour ago!" she accused him incoherently. "Knew my predicament—knew my inevitable weakness and fear and mortification—knew me a stranger among strangers. And yet you came up here to jolly me inconsequently—about a million foolish things!"

"It was because at the end of the hour I hoped to be something to you that would quite prevent your feeling a 'stranger among strangers,'" said Guthrie very quietly. "I have asked you to marry me this afternoon, you must remember."

The young woman's lip curled tremulously. "You astonish me!" she scoffed. "I had always understood that men did not marry very easily. Quick to love, slow to marry, is supposed to be your most striking characteristic—and here are you asking marriage of me, and you haven't even loved me yet!"

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"You women do not seem to marry any too easily," smiled Guthrie gazing nervously from his open watch to the furthest corner of the corral, where the preacher's raw-boned pony, nose in air, was stubbornly refusing to take his bit.

"Indeed we do marry—perfectly easily—when we once love," retorted the woman contentiously! "It's the love part of it that we are reluctant about!"

"But I haven't asked you to love me," protested the man with much patience. "I merely asked you to marry me."

The woman's jaw dropped. "Out of sympathy for my emergency, out of mistaken chivalry, you're asking me to marry you, and not even pretending that you love me?" she asked in astonishment.

"I haven't had time to love you yet. I've only known you such a little while," said the man quite simply. Almost sternly he rose and began to pace up and down the narrow confines of the little piazza. "All I know is," he asserted, "that the very first moment you stepped off the train at Laramie, I knew you were the woman whom I was—going to love—sometime."

Very softly he slid back into the rustic seat he had just vacated, and taking the woman's small clenched hands in his began to smooth out her fingers like poor crumpled ribbons.

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"Now, Little Psychology Teacher," he said, "I want you to listen very, very carefully to everything I say. Do you like me all right?"

"Y—e—s."

"Better than you like Andrews or Ellis or even the old Judge?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Ever since we all started out together on the Trail you've just sort of naturally fallen to my lot, haven't you? Whenever you needed your pony's girth tightened, or whenever you wanted a drink of water, or whenever the big canyons scared you, or whenever the camp fire smoked you, you've just sort of naturally turned to me, haven't you? And it would be fair enough, wouldn't it, to say that at least I've never made any situation worse for you? So that if anything ugly or awkward were going to happen—perhaps you really would rather have me around than any one else?"

"Yes—surely."

"Maybe even, when we've been watching Ellis and his Missis riding ahead, all hand in hand and smile in smile, you've wondered a bit, woman-like, how it would seem, for instance, to be

riding along hand in hand and smile in smile with me?"

"P-o-s-s-i-b-l-y."

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"Never had any special curiosity about how it would seem to go hand and hand with—Andrews?"

"Foolish!"

"Hooray!" cried Guthrie. "That's all that I really needed to know! Oh, don't feel bashful about it. It surely is an absolutely impersonal compliment on your part. It isn't even you that I'm under obligations to for the kindness, but Nature with a great big capital 'N.' Somehow I always have had an idea that you women instinctively do divide all mankind into three classes: first, Those Whom You Couldn't Possibly Love; second, Those Whom You Could Possibly Love, and third, the One Man of the World Whom You Actually Do Love. And unless this mysterious Nature with a capital 'N' has already qualified a man for the second class, God himself can't promote that man into the third class. So it seems to me that every fellow could save himself an awful lot of misunderstanding and wasted time if he'd do just what I've done—make a distinctly preliminary proposal to his lady; not 'Do you love me?' which might take her fifteen years to decide, but: 'Could you love me?' which any woman can tell the first time she sees you. And if she can't possibly love you, that settles everything neatly then and there, but if she can possibly, why, with Nature once on his side, a man's a craven who can't put up a mighty good scrap for his coveted prize. Doesn't this all make sense to you?"

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Cannily the young woman lifted her eyes to his and fathomed him mutely for an instant. Then:

"Perfectly good 'sense' but no feeling," she answered dully.

"It's only 'sense' that I'm trying to make," acknowledged Guthrie. "Now look here, you Little Teacher Person, I'm going to talk to you just as bluntly as I would to another fellow. You are in a hole—the deuce of a hole! You have got typhoid fever, and it may run ten days and it may run ten weeks! And you are two thousand miles from home—among strangers! And no matter how glad I personally may be that you did push on and join us, sick or well, from every practical standpoint, of course, it surely was heedless and ill-considered of you to start off in poor health on a trip like this and run the risk of forcing perfectly unconcerned strangers to pay for it all. Personally, you seem so much to belong to me already that it gives me goose-flesh to think of your having to put yourself under obligations to any purely conscientious person. Mrs. Ellis, of course, will insist, out of common humanity, upon giving up her trip and staying behind with you, but Mrs. Ellis, Little Teacher, is on her honeymoon, and Ellis couldn't stay behind—it's his party—he'd have to go on with his people—and you'd never be able to compensate anybody for a broken honeymoon, and the Judge's youngster couldn't nurse a sick kitten, and the two women teachers from New York have been planning seven years for this trip, they told me, and we couldn't decently take it away from them. But you and I, Little Psychology Lady, are not strangers to each other. Hanlon's Mary here at the ranch house, rough as she is, has at least the serving hands of a woman, and Andrews belongs naturally to the tribe which is consecrated to inconveniences, and both can be compensated accordingly. And I would have married you, anyway, before another year was out! Yes, I would!"

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Apparently ignoring everything that he had said, she turned her face scowlingly toward the sound of hammering that issued suddenly through the piazza door.

"Oh, Glory!" she complained. "Are they making my coffin already?"

With a little laugh, Guthrie relinquished her limp fingers, and jumping up, took another swift turn along the piazza, stopping only to bang the door shut again. When he faced her once more the twinkle was all gone from his eyes.

"You're quite right, what you said about men," he resumed with desperate seriousness. "We are a heap sight quicker in our susceptibilities than in our mentalities! Therefore, no sane man ever does marry till his brain has caught up with his emotions! But sometimes, you know, something happens that hustles a man's brain along a bit, and this time my brain seems fairly to have jumped to its destination and clean-beaten even the emotions in the race. In cool, positive judgment I tell you I want to marry you this afternoon."

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"You've confessed yourself, haven't you, that you've no severer ideal for marriage than that a man should be generous enough to give your personality, no matter how capricious, a chance to breathe? Haven't I qualified sufficiently as that amiable man? More than that, I'm free to love you; I'm certainly keen to serve you; I'm reasonably well able to provide for you, and you naturally have a right to know that I've led a decent life. It's ten good years now since I was thirty and first found nerve enough to break away from the stifling business life I hated and get out into the open, where there's surely less money but infinitely more air. And in ten years I've certainly found considerable chance to fulfil a few of the items in my own little 'List of Necessities.' I've seen Asia and I've seen Africa, and I've written the book I've always wanted to write on North American mountain structures.

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"But there's a lot more that I crave to do. Maybe I've got a bit of a 'capricious personality' myself! Maybe I also have been hunting for the mate who would give my personality a chance to breathe. Certainly I've never wanted any home yet, except when the right time came, the arms of the right woman. And I guess you must be she, because you're the first woman I've ever seen

whom I'd trust to help me just as hard to play my chosen games as I'd help her to play hers! I tell you—I want—very much—to marry you this afternoon."

"Why do you dally with me so? Isn't it your own argument that there's only just one day in the love-life of a man and woman when the question and the answer mate exactly, and the books are balanced perfectly even for the new start together? Demand and supply, debit and credit, hunger and food? You, wild for help, and I wild to help you! What difference does it make what you call it? Isn't this our day?"

"For a man who's usually as silent as you are, don't you think you're talking a good deal, considering how sick you said I was?" asked the young woman, not unmirthfully.

Guthrie's square jaws snapped together like a trap. "I was merely trying to detain you," he mumbled, "until Hanlon had finished knocking the windows out of your room. We're going to give you all the air you can breathe, anyway." [317]

A little sullenly he started for the stairs. Then just at the door he turned unexpectedly and his face was all smiles again.

"Little Psychology Teacher," he said, "I have made you a formal, definite offer of marriage. And in just about ten minutes from now I am coming back for my answer."

When he did return a trifle sooner than he had intended, he met her in the narrow upper hallway, with hands outstretched, groping her way unsteadily toward her room. As though her equilibrium was altogether disturbed by his sudden advent, she reeled back against the wall.

"Mr. Donas Guthrie," she said, "I'm feeling pretty wobbly! Mr. Donas Guthrie," she said, "I guess I'm pretty sick."

"It's a cruel long way down the hall," suggested Guthrie. "Wouldn't you like me to carry you?"

"Yes—I—would," sighed the Little Psychology Teacher.

Even to Guthrie's apprehensive mind, her weight proved most astonishingly light. The small head drooping limply back from the slender neck seemed actually the only heavy thing about her, yet there were apparently only two ideas in that head. [318]

"I'm afraid of Hanlon's Mary, and I don't like Dr. Andrews—very—specially—much," she kept repeating aimlessly. Then halfway to her room her body stiffened suddenly.

"Mr. Donas Guthrie," she asked. "Do you think I'm probably going to die?"

"N-a-w!" said Guthrie, his nose fairly crinkling with positiveness.

"But they don't give you much of anything to eat in typhoid, do they?" she persisted hectically.

"I suppose not," acknowledged Guthrie.

With disconcerting unexpectedness she began to cry—a soft, low, whimpery cry like a sleepy child's.

"If any day should come when—they think—that I am going to die," she moaned, "who will there be to see that I do get—something awfully good to eat?"

"I'll see to it," said Guthrie, "if you'll only put me in authority."

As though altogether indifferent to anything that he might say, her tension relaxed again and without further parleying she let Guthrie carry her across the threshold of her room and set her down cautiously in the creaky rocking chair. The eyes that lifted to his were as vague and turbid as brown velvet.

"There's one good thing about typhoid," she moaned. "It doesn't seem to hurt any, does it? In fact, I think I rather like it. It feels as warm and snug and don't-care as a hot lemonade at bed time. But what?" brightening suddenly, "but what was it you asked me to think about? I feel sort of confused—but it was something, I remember, that I was going to argue with you about." [319]

"It was what I said about marrying me," prompted Guthrie.

"Oh, y-e-s," smiled the Little Psychology Teacher. Hazily for a moment she continued staring at him with her fingers prodded deep into her temples. Then suddenly, like a flower blasted with heat, she wilted down into her chair, groping blindly out with one hand toward the sleeve of his coat.

"Whatever you think best to do about it," she faltered, "I guess you'd better arrange pretty quickly—'cause I think—I'm—going—out."

This is how it happened that Mr. and Mrs. Donas Guthrie and Dr. Andrews stayed behind at the ranch house with Hanlon and Hanlon's Mary, and a piebald pony or two, and a herd of Angora goats, and a pink geranium plant, and the strange intermittent smell of a New England farmhouse which lurked in Hanlon's goods and chattels even after thirty years, and three or four stale, tattered magazines—and typhoid fever.

It was typhoid fever that proved essentially the most incalculable companion of them all. Hanlon's austerity certainly never varied from day to day, nor the inherent sullenness of Hanlon's [320]

Mary.

The meager sick-room, stripped to its bare pine skin of every tawdry colored print and fluttering cheese-cloth curtain, faced bluntly toward the west—a vital little laboratory in which the unknown quantity of a woman's endurance and the fallible skill of one man, the stubborn bravery of another, and the quite inestimable will of God were to be fused together in a desperate experiment to precipitate Life rather than Death.

So October waxed into November, and so waxed misgiving into apprehension, and apprehension into actual fear. In any more cheerful situation it would have been at least interesting to have watched the infuriated expletives issue from Andrew's perennially smiling lips.

"Oh, hang not having anything to work with!" he kept reiterating and reiterating. "Hang being shut off like this on a ranch where there aren't anything but sheep and goats and one old stingy cow that Hanlon's Mary guards with her life 'cause the lady's only a school teacher, but a baby is a baby.' Hang Hanlon's Mary! And hang not being altogether able to blame her! And hang not knowing, anyway, just what nanny-goat's milk would do for a typhoid patient! And hang—" [321]

But before the expletives, and through the expletives, and after the expletives, Andrews was all hero, working, watching, experimenting, retrenching, humanly comprehensive, more than humanly vigilant.

So, with the brain of a doctor and the heart of a lover, the two men worked and watched and waited through the tortuous autumn days and nights, blind to the young dawn stealing out like a luminous mist from the night-smothered mountains; deaf to the flutter of sun-dried leaves in the radiant noon-time; dull to the fruit-scented fragrance of the early twilight, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, sensing nothing, except the flicker of a pulse or the rise of a temperature.

And then at last there came a harsh, wintry feeling day, when Andrews, stepping out into the hall, called Guthrie softly to him and said, still smiling:

"Guthrie, old man, I don't think we're going to win this game!"

"W-h-a-t?" gasped Guthrie.

With his mouth still curling amiably around his words, Andrews repeated the phrase. "I said, I don't think we're going to win this game. No, nothing new's happened. She's simply burning out. Can't you understand? I mean she's probably—going to die!" [322]

Out of the jumble of words that hurtled through Guthrie's mind only four slipped his lips.

"But—she's—my—wife!" he protested.

"Other men's wives have died before this," said Andrews still smiling.

"Man," cried Guthrie, "if you smile again, I'll break your head!"

With his tears running down like rain into the broadening trough of his smile, Andrews kept right on smiling. "You needn't be so cross about it," he said. "You're not the only one who likes her! I wanted her myself! You're nothing but a tramp on the face of the earth—and I could have given her the snuggest home in Yonkers!"

With their arms across each other's shoulders they went back into the sick room.

Rousing from her lethargy, the young woman opened her eyes upon them with the first understanding that she had shown for some days. Inquisitively she stared from Guthrie's somber eyes to Andrews' distorted cheerfulness.

Taking instant advantage of her unwonted rationality, Andrews blurted out the question that was uppermost in his professional responsibility.

"Don't you think, maybe, your people ought to know about your being sick?" he said. "Now, if you could give us any addresses."

For a second it really seemed as though the question would merely safely ignite her common sense. [323]

"Why yes, of course," she acquiesced. "My brother."

Then suddenly, without any warning, her most dangerous imagination caught fire.

"You mean," she faltered, "that—I—am—not—going to get well?"

Before either man was quick enough to contradict her, the shock had done its work. Piteously she turned her face to the pillow.

"Never—never—to—go—to—Oxford?" she whispered in mournful astonishment. "Never—even—to—see my—Bay of Naples?—Never to—have a—a—perfectly happy Christmas?" A little petulantly then her brain began to clog. "I think I—might at least have had—the pink sash!" she complained. Then, equally suddenly her strength rallied for an instant and the eyes that she lifted to Guthrie's were filled with a desperate effort at raillery. "Bring on your—anchovies and caviar," she reminded him, "and the stuffed green peppers—and remember I don't like my fillet too well

done—and—"

Five minutes later in the hallway Andrews caught Guthrie just as he was chasing downstairs after Hanlon.

"What are you going to do?" he asked curiously.

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"I am going to send Hanlon out to the telegraph station," said Guthrie. "I'm going to wire to Denver for a pink sash!"

"What she was raving about?" quizzed Andrews. "Are you raving too?"

"It's the only blamed thing in the whole world that she's asked for that I can get her," said Guthrie.

"It'll take five days," growled Andrews.

"I know it!"

"It won't do her any good."

"I can't help that!"

"She'll—be gone before it gets here."

"You can't help that!"

But she wasn't "gone," at all before it came. All her vitalities charred, to be sure, like a fire-swept woodland, but still tenacious of life, still fighting for reorganization, a little less feverish, a little stronger-pulsed, she opened her eyes in a puzzled, sad sort of little smile when Guthrie shook the great, broad, shimmering gauze-like ribbon ticklingly down across her wasted hands, and then apparently drowsed off to sleep again. But when both men came back to the room a few moments later, almost half the pink sash was cuddled under her cheek. And Hanlon's Mary came and peered through the doorway, with the whining baby still in her arms, and reaching out and fretting a piece of pink fringe between her hardy fingers, sniffed mightily.

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"And you sent my man all the way to the wire," she asked, "and grubbed him three whole days waitin' round, just for that?"

"Yes, sure," said Guthrie.

"G-a-w-d!" said Hanlon's Mary.

And, the next week the patient was even better, and the next week, better still. Then, one morning after days and days of seemingly interminable silence and stupor, she opened her eyes perfectly wide and asked Guthrie abruptly:

"Whom did I marry? You or Dr. Andrews?"

And Guthrie in a sudden perversity of shock and embarrassment lied grimly:

"Dr. Andrews!"

"I didn't either!—it was you!" came the immediate, not too strong, but distinctly temperish response.

Something in the new vitality of the tone made Guthrie stop whatever he was doing and eye her suspiciously.

"How long have you been conscious like this?" he queried in surprise.

The faintest perceptible flicker of mischief crossed her haggard face.

"Three—days," she acknowledged.

"Then why—?" began Guthrie.

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"Because I—didn't know—just what to call you," she faltered.

After that no power on earth apparently could induce any further speech from her for another three days. Solemn and big-eyed and totally unfathomable, she lay watching Guthrie's every gesture, every movement. From the door to the chair, from the chair to the window, from the window back to the chair, she lay estimating him altogether disconcertingly. Across the hand that steadied her drinking glass, she studied the poise of his lean, firm wrist. Out from the shadow-mystery of her heavy lashes, she questioned the ultimate value of each frown or smile.

And then, suddenly—just as abruptly as the first time she had spoken:

"What day is it?" she asked.

"It's Christmas," said Guthrie softly.

"O-h!—O-h!—O-h!" she exclaimed, very slowly. Then with increasing interest and wonder, "Is there snow on the ground?" she whispered.

"No," said Guthrie.

"Is it full moon to-night?" she questioned.

"No," said Guthrie.

"Is there any small, freckle-faced, alto-voiced choir boy in the house, trotting around humming funny little tail-ends of anthems and carols, while he's buckling up his skates?" she stammered. [327]

"No," said Guthrie.

"Are there any old, white-haired loving people cuddled in the chimney corner?" she persisted.

"No," said Guthrie.

"Isn't there—any Christmas tree?"

"No."

"Aren't there even any presents?"

"No."

"Oh!" she smiled. "Isn't it funny!"

"What's funny?" asked Guthrie perplexedly.

The eyes that lifted to his were brimming full of a strange, wistful sort of astonishment. "Why, it's funny," she faltered, "it's funny—that without—any of these things—that I thought were so necessary to it—I've found my 'perfectly happy Christmas.'"

Then, almost bashfully, her wisp-like fingers went straying out toward the soft silken folds of the precious pink sash which she kept always close to her pillow.

"If—you—don't—mind," she said, "I think I'll cut my sash in two and give half of it to Hanlon's Mary to make a dress for her baby."

The medicine spoon dropped rather clatteringly out of Guthrie's hand.

"But I sent all the way to Denver for it," he protested.

"Oh, yes, I know all about that," she acknowledged. "But—what—can—a great big girl—like me—do with a—pink sash?" [328]

"But you said you wanted it!" cried Guthrie. "Why, it took a man and a pony and a telegraph station five entire days to get it, and they had to flag the express train specially for it—and—and—"

A little wearily she closed her eyes and then opened them again blinkingly.

"I'm pretty tired, now," she said, "so I don't want to talk about it—but don't you—understand? I've revised my whole list of necessities. Out of the wide—wide—world—I find that I don't really want anything—except—just—you!"

WOMAN'S ONLY BUSINESS

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THE men at the club were horridly busy that night discussing the silly English law about marrying your dead wife's sister. The talk was quite rabid enough even before an English High-churchman infused his pious venom into the subject-matter. When the argument was at its highest and the drinks were at their lowest, Bertus Sagner, the biology man at the university, jumped up from his seat with blazing eyes and said "RATS!"—not anything long and Latin, not anything obscure and evasive, not even "rodents," but just plain "RATS!" The look on his face was inordinately disgusted, or indeed more than disgusted, unless disgust is perhaps an emotion that may at times be served red-hot. As he broke away from the gabbling crowd and began to hunt noisily round the room for his papers, I gathered up my own chemistry notebook and started after him. I was a new man in town and a comparative stranger. But Sagner and I had been chums once long ago in Berlin. [332]

At the outside door he turned now and eyed me a bit shamefacedly. "Barney, old man," he said, "are you going my way? Well, come along." The broad-shouldered breadth of the two of us blocked out the light from the shining chandelier and sent our clumsy feet fairly stumbling down the harsh granite steps. The jarring lurch exploded Sagner's irritation into a short, sharp, damny growl, and I saw at once that his nerves were raw like a woman's.

As we turned into the deep-shadowed, spooky-black college roadway, the dormitories' yellow lights and laughter flared forth grotesquely like the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge cut up for a Jack-o'-Lantern. At the edge of the Lombardy poplars I heard Sagner swallowing a little bit overhard.

"I suspect that I made rather a fool of myself back there," he confided abruptly, "but if there's anything under the day or night sky that makes me mad, it's the idiotic babble, babble, babble, these past few weeks about the 'dead wife's sister' law."

"What's your grouch?" I asked. "You're not even a married man, let alone a widower."

He stopped suddenly with a spurting match and a big cigar and lighted up unconsciously all the extraordinary frowning furrows of his face. The match went out and he struck another, and that match went out and he struck another—and another, and all the time it seemed to me as though just the flame in his face was hot enough to kindle any ordinary cigar. After each fruitless, breeze-snuffed effort he snapped his words out like so many tiny, tempery torpedoes. "Of—all—the—rot!" he ejaculated. "Of—all—the nonsense!" he puffed and mumbled. "A—whole—great, grown-up empire fussing and brawling about a 'dead wife's sister.' A dead wife! What does a dead wife care who marries her sister? Great heavens! If they really want to make a good moral law that will help somebody, why—don't—they—make—a—law—that will forbid a man's flirting with his living wife's sister?"

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When I laughed I thought he would strike me, but after a husky second he laughed, too, through a great blue puff of smoke and a blaze like the headlight of an engine. In another instant he had vaulted the low fence and was starting off across lots for his own rooms, but before I could catch up with him he whirled abruptly in his tracks and came back to me.

"Will you come over to the Lennarts' with me for a moment?" he asked. "I was there at dinner with them to-night and I left my spectacles."

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Very willingly I acquiesced, and we plunged off single file into the particular darkness that led to Professor Lennart's rose-garden. Somewhere remotely in my mind hummed and halted a vague, evasive bit of man-gossip about Lennart's amazingly pretty sister-in-law. Yet Sagner did not look exactly to me like a man who was going courting. Even in that murky darkness I could visualize perfectly from Sagner's pose and gait the same strange, bleak, facial furnishings that had attracted me so astoundingly in Berlin—the lean, flat cheeks cleaned close as the floor of a laboratory; the ugly, short-cropped hair; the mouth, just for work; the nose, just for work; the ears, just for work—not a single, decorative, pleasant thing from crown to chin except those great, dark, gorgeous, miraculously virgin eyes, with the huge, shaggy eyebrows lowering down prudishly over them like two common doormats on which every incoming vision must first stop and wipe its feet. Once in a café in Berlin I saw a woman try to get into Sagner's eyes—without stopping. Right in the middle of our dinner I jumped as though I had been shot. "Why, what was *that*?" I cried. "What was *that*?"

"What was what?" drawled Sagner. Try as I might the tiniest flicker of a grin tickled my lips. "Oh, nothing," I mumbled apologetically. "I just thought I heard a door slam-bang in a woman's face."

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"What door?" said Sagner stupidly. "What woman?"

Old Sagner was deliciously stupid over many things, but he dissected the darkness toward Professor Lennart's house as though it had been his favorite kind of cadaver. Here, was the hardening turf, compact as flesh. There, was the tough, tight tendon of the ripping ground pine. Farther along under an exploring match a great vapid peony loomed like a dead heart. Somewhere out in an orchard the May-blooms smelled altogether too white. Almost at the edge of the Lennarts' piazza he turned and stepped back to my pace and began talking messily about some stale biological specimen that had just arrived from the Azores.

College people, it seemed, did not ring bells for one another, and the most casual flop of Sagner's knuckles against the door brought Mrs. Lennart almost immediately to welcome us. "Almost immediately," I say, because the slight, faltering delay in her footfall made me wonder even then whether it was limb or life that had gone just a little bit lame. But the instant the hall light struck her face my hand clutched down involuntarily on Sagner's shoulder. It was the same, same face whose brighter, keener, shinier pastelled likeness had been the only joyous object in Sagner's homesick German room. With almost embarrassing slowness now we followed her lagging steps back to the library.

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It was the first American home that I had seen for some years, and the warmth of it, and the color, and the glow, and the luxurious, deep-seated comfort, mothered me like the notes of an old, old song. Between the hill-green walls the long room stretched like a peaceful valley to the very edge of the huge, gray field-stone fireplace that blocked the final vista like a furious breastwork raised against all the invading tribes of history. Red books and gold frames and a chocolate-colored bronze or two caught up the flickering glint from the apple-wood fire, and out of some shadowy corner flanked by a grand piano a young girl's contralto voice, sensuous as liquid plush, was lipping its magic way up and down the whole wonderful, molten scale.

The corner was rather small, but out of it loomed instantly the tall, supple figure of Professor Lennart with his thousand-year-old brown eyes and his young gray hair. We were all big fellows, but Lennart towered easily three inches over anybody else's head. Professionally, too, he had outstripped the rest of us. People came gadding from all over the country to consult his historical criticisms and interpretations. And I hardly know how to express the man's vivid, luminous, incandescent personality. Surely no mother in a thousand would have chosen to have her son look like me, and I hope that no mother in a million would really have yearned to have a boy look like Sagner, but any mother, I think, would gladly have compromised on Lennart. I suppose he

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was handsome. Rising now, as he did, from the murkiest sort of a shadow, the mental and physical radiance of him made me want to laugh right out loud just for sheer pleasure.

Following closely behind his towering bulk, the girl with the contralto voice stepped out into the lamplight, and I made my most solemn and profound German bow over her proffered hand before the flaming mischief in her finger tips sent my eyes staring up into her astonishing face.

I have never thought that American women are extraordinarily beautiful, but rather that they wear their beauty like a thinnish sort of veil across the adorable, insistent expressiveness of their features. But this girl's face was so thick with beauty that you could not tell in one glance, or even two glances, or perhaps three, whether she had any expression at all. Kindness or meanness, brightness or dullness, pluck or timidity, were absolutely undecipherable in that physically perfect countenance. She was very small, and very dark, and very active, with hair like the color of eight o'clock—daylight and darkness and lamplight all snarled up together—and lips all crude scarlet, and eyes as absurdly big and round as a child's good-by kiss. Yet never for one instant could you have called her anything so impassive as "attractive." "Attracting" is the only hasty, ready-made word that could possibly fit her. Personally I do not like the type. The prettiest picture postal that ever was printed could not lure me across the borders of any unknown country. When I travel even into Friendship Land I want a good, clear face-map to guide my explorations. [338]

There was a boy, too, in the room—the Lennarts' son—a brown-faced lad of thirteen whose algebraic séance with his beloved mother we had most brutally interrupted.

Professor Lennart's fad, as I have said, was history. Mrs. Lennart's fad was presumably housekeeping. The sister-in-law's fad was unmistakably men. Like an electric signboard her fascinating, spectacular sex-vanity flamed and flared from her coyly drooped eyes to her showy little feet. Every individual gesture signaled distinctly, "I am an extraordinarily beautiful little woman." Now it was her caressing hand on Lennart's shoulder; now it was her maddening, dazzling smile hurled like a bombshell into Sagner's perfectly prosy remark about the weather, now it was her teasing lips against the boy's tousled hair; now it was her tip-toeing, swaying, sweet-breathed exploration of a cobweb that the linden trees had left across my shoulder. [339]

Lennart was evidently utterly subjugated. Like a bright moth and a very dull flame the girl chased him unceasingly from one chair, or one word, or one laugh to another. A dozen times their hands touched, or their smiles met, or their thoughts mated in distinctly personal if not secret understanding. Once when Mrs. Lennart stopped suddenly in the midst of my best story and asked me to repeat what I had been saying, I glanced up covertly and saw the girl kissing the tip of her finger a little bit over-mockingly to her brother-in-law. Never in any country but America could such a whole scene have been enacted in absolute moral innocence. It made me half ashamed and half very proud of my country. In continental Europe even the most trivial, innocent audacity assumes at once such utterly preposterous proportions of evil. But here before my very eyes was the most dangerous man-and-woman game in the world being played as frankly and ingenuously and transiently as though it had been croquet.

Through it all, Sagner, frowning like ten devils, sat at the desk with his chin in his hands, staring—staring at the girl. I suppose that she thought he was fascinated. He was. He was fairly yearning to vivisect her. I had seen that expression before in his face—reverence, repulsion, attraction, distaste, indomitable purpose, blood-curdling curiosity—SCIENCE. [340]

When I dragged him out of the room and down the steps half an hour later my sides were cramped with laughter. "If we'd stayed ten minutes longer," I chuckled, "she would have called you 'Bertie' and me 'Boy.'"

But Sagner would not laugh.

"She's a pretty girl all right," I ventured again.

"Pretty as h—," whispered Sagner.

As we rounded the corner of the house the long French window blazed forth on us. Clear and bright in the lamplight stood Lennart with his right arm cuddling the girl to his side. "Little sister," he was saying, "let's go back to the piano and have some more music." Smiling her kindly good night we saw Mrs. Lennart gather up her books and start off limpingly across the hall, with the devoted boy following close behind her.

"Then she's really lame?" I asked Sagner as we swung into the noisy gravel path.

"Oh, yes," he said; "she got hurt in a runaway accident four years ago. Lennart doesn't know how to drive a *goat*!" [341]

"Seems sort of too bad," I mused dully.

Then Sagner laughed most astonishingly. "Yes, sort of too bad," he mocked me.

It was almost ten o'clock when we circled back to the college library. Only a few grinds were there buzzing like June-bugs round the low-swinging green lamps. Even the librarian was missing. But Madge Hubert, the librarian's daughter, was keeping office hours in his stead behind a sumptuous old mahogany desk. At the very first college party that I had attended, Madge Hubert had been pointed out to me with a certain distinction as being the girl that Bertus

Sagner was *almost* in love with. Then, as now, I was startled by the surprising youthfulness of her. Surely she was not more than three years ahead of the young girl whom we had left at Professor Lennart's house. With unmistakable friendly gladness she welcomed Sagner to the seat nearest her, and accorded me quite as much chair and quite as much smile as any new man in a university town really deserved. In another moment she had closed her book, pushed a full box of matches across the table to us, and switched off the electric light that fairly threatened to scorch her straight blond hair.

One by one the grinds looked up and nodded and smiled, and puckered their vision toward the clock, and "folded their tents like the Arabs and silently stole away," leaving us two men there all alone with the great silent room, and the long, rangy, echoing metal book-stacks, and the duddy-looking portraits, and the dopy-acting busts, and the sleek gray library cat—and the girl. Maybe Sagner came every Wednesday night to help close the library. [342]

Certainly I liked the frank, almost boyish manner in which the two friends included me in their friendship by seeming to ignore me altogether.

"What's the matter, Bertus?" the girl began quite abruptly. "You look worried. What's the matter?"

"Nothing is ever the matter," said Sagner.

The girl laughed, and began to build a high, tottering paper tower out of a learned-looking pack of catalogue cards. Just at the moment of completion she gave a sharp little inadvertent sigh and the tower fluttered down.

"What's the matter with *you*?" quizzed Sagner.

"Nothing is ever the matter with me, either," she mocked smilingly.

Trying to butt into the silence that was awkward for me, if not for them, I rummaged my brain for speech, and blurted out triumphantly, "We've just come from Professor Lennart's."

"Just come from Professor Lennart's?" she repeated slowly, lifting her eyebrows as though the thought was a little bit heavy. [343]

"Yes," said Sagner bluntly. "I've been there twice this evening."

With a rather playful twist of her lips the girl turned to me. "What did you think of 'Little Sister'?" she asked.

But before I could answer, Sagner had pushed me utterly aside once more and was shaking his smoke-stained finger threateningly in Madge Hubert's face. "Why—didn't—you—come—to the—Lennarts'—to—dinner—to-night—as—you—were—invited?" he scolded.

The girl put her chin in her hand and cuddled her fingers over her mouth and her nose and part of her blue eyes.

"I don't go to the Lennarts' any more—if I can help it," she mumbled.

"Why not?" shouted Sagner.

She considered the question very carefully, then "Go ask the other girls," she answered a trifle hotly. "Go ask any one of them. We all stay away for exactly the same reason."

"WHAT IS THE REASON?" thundered Sagner in his most terrible laboratory manner.

When Sagner speaks like that to me, I always grab hold of my head with both hands and answer just as fast as I possibly can, for I remember only too distinctly all the shining assortment of different sized knives and scalpels in his workshop and I have always found that a small, narrow, quick question makes the smallest, narrowest, quickest, soon-overest incision into my secret. [344]

But Madge Hubert only laughed at the laboratory manner.

"Say 'Please,'" she whispered.

"Please!" growled Sagner, with his very own blood flushing all over his face and hands.

"Now—what is it you want to know?" she asked, frittering her fingers all the time over that inky-looking pack of catalogue cards.

Somehow, strange as it may seem, I did not feel an atom in the way, but rather that the presence of a third person, and that person myself, gave them both a certain daring bravado of speech that they would scarcely have risked alone with each other.

"What do I want to know?" queried Sagner. "I want to know—in fact—I'm utterly mad to know—just what your kind of woman thinks of 'Little Sister's' kind of woman."

With a startled gesture Madge Hubert looked back over her shoulder toward a creak in the literature book-stack, and Sagner jumped up with a great air of mock conspiracy, and went tip-toeing all around among the metal corridors in search of possible eavesdroppers, and then came flouncing back and stuffed tickly tissue paper into the gray cat's ears. [345]

Then "Why don't you girls go to the Lennarts' any more?" he resumed with quickly recurrent gravity.

For a moment Madge Hubert dallied to shuffle one half of her pack of cards into the other half. Then she looked up and smiled the blond way a white-birch tree smiles in the sunshine.

"Why—we don't go any more because we don't have a good time," she confided. "After you've come home from a party once or twice and cried yourself to sleep, it begins to dawn on you very gradually that you didn't have a very good time. We don't like 'Little Sister.' She makes us feel ashamed."

"Oh!" said Sagner, rather brutally. "You are all jealous!"

But if he had expected for a second to disconcert Madge Hubert he was most ingloriously mistaken.

"Yes," she answered perfectly simply. "We are all jealous."

"Of her beauty?" scowled Sagner.

"Oh, no," said Madge Hubert. "Of her innocence."

Acid couldn't have eaten the fiber out of Madge Hubert's emotional honesty. "Why, yes," she hurried on vehemently, "among all the professors' daughters here in town there isn't one of us who is innocent enough to do happily even once the things that 'Little Sister' does every day of her life. You are quite right. We are all furiously jealous." [346]

With sudden professional earnestness she ran her fingers through the catalogue cards and picked out one and slapped it down in front of Sagner. "There!" she said. "That's the book that explains all about it. It says that jealousy is an emotion that is aroused only by business competition, which accounts, of course, for the fact that, socially speaking, you very rarely find any personal enmity between men. There are so many, many different kinds of businesses for men, that interests very seldom conflict—so that the broker resents *only* the broker, and the minister resents *only* the minister, and the merchant resents *only* the merchant. Why, Bertus Sagner," she broke off abruptly, "you fairly idolize your chemistry friend here, and Lennart for history, and Dudley for mathematics, and all the others, and you glory in their achievements, and pray for their successes. But if there were another biology man here in town, you'd tear him and his methods tooth and nail, day and night. Yes, you would!—though you'd cover your hate a foot deep with superficial courtesies and 'professional etiquette.'" [347]

She began to laugh. "Oh, the book is very wise," she continued more lightly. "It goes on to say that woman's only business in the whole wide world is LOVE—that Love is really the one and only, the Universal Profession for Women—so that every mortal feminine creature, from the brownest gypsy to the whitest queen, is in brutal, acute competition with her neighbor. It's funny, isn't it!" she finished brightly.

"Very funny," growled Sagner.

"So you see," she persisted, "that we girls are jealous of 'Little Sister' in just about the same way in which an old-fashioned, rather conservative department store would be jealous of the first ten-cent store that came to town." A sudden rather fine white pride paled suddenly in her cheeks. "It isn't, you understand," she said, "it isn't because the ten-cent store's rhinestone comb, or tinsel ribbon, or slightly handled collar really competes with the other store's plainer but possibly honester values, but—because in the long run the public's frittered taste and frittered small change is absolutely bound to affect the general receipts of the more conservative store."

"And it isn't," she added hastily, "it isn't, you know, because we're not used to men. There isn't one of us—from the time we were sixteen years old—who hasn't been quite accustomed to entertain anywhere from three to a dozen men every evening of her life. But we can't entertain them the way 'Little Sister' does." A hot, red wave of mortification flooded her face. "We tried it once," she confessed, "and it didn't work. Just before the last winter party seven of us girls got together and deliberately made up our minds to beat 'Little Sister' at her own game. Wasn't it disgusting of us to start out actually and deliberately with the intention of being just a little wee bit free and easy with men?" [348]

"How did it work?" persisted Sagner, half agrin.

The color flushed redder and redder into Madge Hubert's cheeks.

"I went to the party with the new psychology substitute," she continued bravely, "and as I stepped into the carriage I called him 'Fred'—and he looked as though he thought I was demented. But fifteen minutes afterward I heard 'Little Sister' call him 'Psyche'—and he laughed." She began to laugh herself.

"But how did the party come out?" probed Sagner, going deeper and deeper.

The girl sobered instantly. "There were seven of us," she said, "and we all were to meet at the house of one of the girls at twelve o'clock and compare experiences. Three of us came home at ten o'clock—crying. And four of us didn't turn up till half-past one—laughing. But the ones who came home crying were the only ones who really had any fun out of it. The game was altogether too easy—that was the trouble with it. But the four who came home laughing had been bored to [349]

death with their *un*-successes."

"Which lot were you in?" cried Sagner.

She shook her head. "I won't tell you," she whispered.

With almost startling pluck she jumped up suddenly and switched the electric light full blast into her tense young face and across her resolute shoulders.

"Look at me!" she cried. "Look at me! As long as men are men—what have I that can possibly, possibly compete with a girl like 'Little Sister'? Can I climb up into a man's face every time I want to speak to him? Can I pat a man's shoulder every time he passes me in a room? Can I hold out my quivering white hand and act perfectly helpless in a man's presence every time that I want to step into a carriage, or out of a chair? Can I cry and grieve and mope into a man's arms at a dance just because I happen to cut my finger on the sharp edge of my dance-order? Bah! If a new man came to town and made not one single man-friend but called all of us girls by our first names the second time he saw us, and rolled his eyes at us, and fluttered his hands, you people would call him the biggest fool in Christendom—but you flock by the dozens and the hundreds and the millions every evening to see 'Little Sister.' And great, grown-up, middle-aged boys like *you*, Bertus Sagner, flock *twice* in the same evening!"

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With astounding irrelevance Sagner burst out laughing. "Why, Madge," he cried, "you're perfectly superb when you're mad. Keep it up. Keep it up. I didn't know you had it in you! Why, you dear, gorgeous girl—WHY AREN'T YOU MARRIED?"

Like a scarlet lightning-bolt spiked with two-edged knives the red wrath of the girl descended then and there on Sagner's ugly head. With her heaving young shoulders braced like a frenzied creature at bay, against a great, silly, towering tier of "Latest Novels," she hurled her flaming, irrevocable answer crash-bang into Sagner's astonished, impertinent face.

"You want to know why I'm not married?" she cried. "You want to know why I'm not married? Well, I'll tell you—why—I'm—not married, Bertus Sagner, and I'll use yourself for an illustration—for when I do come to marry, it is written in the stars that I must of necessity marry your kind, a mature, cool, calculating, emotionally-tamed man, a man of brain as well as brawn, a man of fame if not of fortune, a man bred intellectually, morally, socially, into the same wonderfully keen, thinky corner of the world where I was born—nothing but a woman.

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"For four years, Bertus Sagner, ever since I was nineteen years old, people have come stumbling over each other at college receptions to stare at me because I am 'the girl that Bertus Sagner, the big biologist, is *almost* in love with.' And you *are* 'almost' in love with me, Bertus Sagner. You can't deny it! And what is more, you will stay 'almost' in love with me till our pulses run down like clocks, and our eyes burn out like lamps, and the Real Night comes. If I remain here in this town, even when I am middle-aged—people will come and stare at me—because of you. And when I am old, and you are gone—altogether, people will still be talking about it. 'Almost in love' with me. Yes, Bertus Sagner, but if next time you came to see me, I should even so much as dally for a second on the arm of your chair, and slip my hand just a little bit tremulously into yours, and brush my lips like the ghost of a butterfly's wing across your love-starved face, you would probably find out then and there in one great, blinding, tingling, crunching flash that you *LOVE ME NOW!* But I don't want *you*, Bertus Sagner, nor any other man, at that price. The man who was made for me will love me first and get his petting afterward. There! Do you understand now?"

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As though Sagner's gasp for breath was no more than the flutter of a book-leaf, she plunged on, "And as for Mrs. Lennart—"

Sagner jumped to his feet. "We weren't talking about Mrs. Lennart," he exclaimed hotly.

It has always seemed to me that very few things in the world are as quick as a woman's anger. But nothing in the world, I am perfectly positive, is as quick as a woman's amusement. As though an anarchist's bomb had exploded into confetti, Madge Hubert's sudden laughter sparkled through the room.

"Now, Bertus Sagner," she teased, "you just sit down again and listen to what I have to say."

Sagner sat down.

And as casually as though she were going to pour afternoon tea the girl slipped back into her own chair, and gave me a genuinely mirthful side-glance before she resumed her attack on Sagner.

"You were, too, talking about Mrs. Lennart," she insisted. "When you asked me to tell you exactly what a girl of my kind thinks of a girl like 'Little Sister,' do you suppose for a second I didn't understand that the thing you really wanted to find out was whether Mrs. Lennart was getting hurt or not in this 'Little Sister' business? Oh, no, Mrs. Lennart hasn't been hurt for a long, long time—several months perhaps. I think she looks a little bit bored now and then, but not hurt."

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"Lennart's a splendid fellow," protested Sagner.

"He's a splendid fool," said Madge Hubert. "And after a woman once discovers that her husband is a fool I don't suppose that any extra illustrations on his part make any particular

difference to her."

"Why, you don't—really think," stammered Sagner, "that there's any actual harm in Lennart's perfectly frank infatuation with 'Little Sister'?"

"Oh, no," said Madge Hubert, "of course there's no real harm in it at all. It's only that Mrs. Lennart has got to realize once for all that the special public that she has catered to so long and faithfully with honest values and small profit, has really got a ten-cent taste! Most men have. And it isn't, you know, because Professor Lennart really wants or needs all these ten-cent toys and favors, but because he probably never before in all his studious, straight, idealistic life saw glittering nonsense so inordinately cheap and easy to get. Talk about women being 'bargain-hunters'!"

"But, of course, it's all pretty apt to ruin Mrs. Lennart's business. Anybody with half a heart could see that her stock is beginning to run down. She hasn't put in a new idea for months. She's wearing last year's clothes. She's thinking last year's thoughts. Even that blessed smile of hers is beginning to get just a little bit stale. You can't get what you want from her any more. Dust and indifference have already begun to set in. How will it end? Oh, I'll tell you how it will end. Pretty soon now college will be over and the men will scatter in five hundred different directions, and 'Little Sister' will be smitten suddenly with conscientious scruples about the 'old folks at home,' and will pack up her ruffles and her fraternity pins and go back to the provincial little town that has made her what she is. And Professor Lennart will mope around the house like a lost soul—for as much as five days—moaning, 'Oh, I wish "Little Sister" was here to-night to sing to me,' and 'I wish "Little Sister" was going to be here to-morrow to go canoeing with me,' and 'I wish "Little Sister" could see this moonlight,' and 'I wish "Little Sister" could taste this wild-strawberry pie.' And then somewhere about the sixth day, when he and Mrs. Lennart are at breakfast or dinner or supper, he'll look up suddenly like a man just freed from a delirium, and drop his cup, or his knife, or his fork 'ker-smash' into his plate, and cry out, 'My Heavens, Mary! But it's pretty good just for *you* and *me* to be alone together again!'"

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"And what will Mrs. Lennart say?" interposed Sagner hastily, with a great puff of smoke.

For some unaccountable reason Madge Hubert's eyes sloped right over with tears.

"What will Mary Lennart say?" she repeated. "Mary Lennart will say: 'Excuse me, dear, but I wasn't listening. I didn't hear what you said. I was trying to remember whether or not I'd put moth-balls in your winter suit.' Though he live to be nine hundred and sixty-two, Harold Lennart's love-life will never rhyme again. But prose, of course, is a great deal easier to live than verse."

As though we had all been discussing the latest foreign theory concerning microbes, Sagner jumped up abruptly and began to rummage furiously through a pile of German bulletins. When he had found and read aloud enough things that he didn't want, he looked up and said nonchalantly, "Let's go home."

"All right," said Madge Hubert.

"Maybe you hadn't noticed that I was here," I suggested, "but I think that perhaps I should like to go home, too."

As we banged the big, oaken, iron-clamped door behind us, Madge Hubert lingered a second and turned her white face up to the waning, yellow moonlight. "I think I'd like to go home through the dark woods," she decided.

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Silently we all turned down into the soft, padded path that ran along the piny shore of our little college lake. Sagner of course led the way. Madge Hubert followed close. And I tagged along behind as merrily as I could. Twice I saw the girl's shoulders shudder.

"Don't you like the woods, Miss Hubert?" I called out experimentally.

She stopped at once and waited for me to catch up with her. There was the very faintest possible suggestion of timidity in the action.

"Don't you like the woods?" I repeated.

She shook her head. "No, not especially," she answered. "That is, not all woods. There's such a difference. Some woods feel as though they had violets in them, and some woods feel as though they had—Indians."

I couldn't help laughing. "How about these woods?" I quizzed.

She gave a little gasp. "I don't believe there are violets in any woods to-night," she faltered.

Even as she spoke we heard a swish and a crackle ahead of us and Sagner came running back. "Let's go round the other way," he insisted.

"I won't go round the other way," said Madge Hubert. "How perfectly absurd! What's the matter?"

Even as she argued we stepped out into the open clearing and met Harold Lennart and "Little Sister" singing their way home hand in hand through the witching night. For an instant our jovial greetings parried together, and then we passed. Not till we had reached Madge Hubert's doorstep did I lose utterly the wonderful lilting echo of that young contralto voice with the man's

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older tenor ringing in and out of it like a shimmery silver lining.

Ten minutes later in Sagner's cluttered workroom we two men sat and stared through our pipe-smoke into each other's evasive eyes.

"Madge didn't—hesitate at all—to tell me a thing or two to-night, did she?" Sagner began at last, gruffly.

I smiled. The relaxation made me feel as though my mouth had really got a chance at last to sit down.

"Am I so very old?" persisted Sagner. "I'm not forty-five."

I shrugged my shoulders.

Pettishly he reached out and clutched at a scalpel, cleansed it for an instant in the flame, and jabbed the point of it into his wrist. The red blood spurted instantly.

"There!" he cried out triumphantly. "I have blood in me! It isn't embalming fluid at all."

"Oh, quit your fooling, you old death-digger," I said. And then with overtense impulse I asked, [358]
"Sagner, man, do you really understand Life?"

Sagner's jaw-bones stiffened instantly. "Oh, yes," he exclaimed. "Oh, yes, of course I understand Life. That is," he added, with a most unusual burst of humility, "I understand everything, I think, except just why the gills of a fish—but, oh, bother, you wouldn't know what I meant; and there's a new French theory about odylic forces that puzzles me a little, and I never, never have been able to understand the particular mental processes of a woman who violates the law of species by naming her firstborn son for any man but his father. I'm not exactly criticising the fish," he added vehemently, "nor the new odylic theory, nor even the woman; I'm simply stating baldly and plainly the only three things under God's heaven that I can't quite seem to fathom."

"What's all this got to do with Mary Lennart?" I asked impatiently.

"Nothing at all to do with Mary Lennart," he answered proudly. "Mary Lennart's son is named Harold." He began to smoke very hard. "Considering the real object of our being put here in the world," he resumed didactically, "it has always seemed to me that the supreme test of character lay in the father's and mother's mental attitude toward their young." [359]

"Couldn't you say 'toward their children'?" I protested.

He brushed my interruption aside. "I don't care," he persisted, "how much a man loves a woman or how much a woman loves a man—the man who deserts his wife during her crucial hour and goes off on a lark to get out of the fuss, and the woman who names her firstborn son for any man except his father, may qualify in all the available moral tenets, but they certainly have slipped up somehow, mentally, in the Real Meaning of things. Thank God," he finished quickly, "that neither Harold Lennart nor Mary has failed the other like that—no matter what else happens." His face whitened. "I stayed with Harold Lennart the night little Harold was born," he whispered rather softly.

Before I could think of just the right thing to say, he jumped up awkwardly and strode over to the looking-glass, and puffed out his great chest and stood and stared at himself.

"I wish I had a son named Bertus Sagner," he said.

"It's all right, of course, to have him named after you," I laughed, "but you surely wouldn't choose to have him look like you, would you?"

He turned on me with absurd fierceness. "I wouldn't marry any woman who didn't love me enough to want her son to look like me!" he exclaimed. [360]

I was still laughing as I picked up my hat. I was still laughing as I stumbled and fumbled down the long, black, steep stairs. Half an hour later in my pillows I was still laughing. But I did not get to sleep. My mind was too messy. After all, when you really come to think of it, a man's brain ought to be made up fresh and clean every night like a hotel bed. Sleep seems to be altogether too dainty a thing to nest in any brain that strange thoughts have rumbled. Always there must be the white sheet of peace edging the blanket of forgetfulness. And perhaps on one or two of life's wintrier nights some sort of spiritual comforter thrown over all.

It was almost a week before I saw any of the Lennarts again. Then, on a Saturday afternoon, as Sagner and I were lolling along the road toward town we met Lennart and "Little Sister" togged out in a lot of gorgeous golf duds. Lennart was delighted to see us, and "Little Sister" made Sagner get down on his knees and tie her shoe lacings twice. I escaped with the milder favor of a pat on the wrist.

"We're going out to the Golf Club," beamed Lennart, "to enter for the tournament."

"Oh," said Sagner, turning to join them. "Shall we find Mrs. Lennart out at the club? Is she going to play?" [361]

A flicker of annoyance went over Lennart's face. "Why, Sagner," he said, "how stupid you are! Don't you know that Mary is lame and couldn't walk over the golf course now to save her life?"

As Sagner turned back to me, and we passed on out of hearing, I noted two red spots flaming hectically in his cheeks.

"It seems to me," he muttered, "that if I had crippled or incapacitated my wife in any way so that she couldn't play golf any more, I wouldn't exactly take another woman into the tournament. I think that singles would just about fit me under the circumstances."

"But Lennart is such a 'splendid fellow,'" I quoted wryly.

"He's a splendid fool," snapped Sagner.

"Why, you darned old copy-cat," I taunted. "It was Miss Hubert who rated him as a 'splendid fool.'"

"Oh," said Sagner.

"Oh, yourself," said I.

Involuntarily we turned and watched the two bright figures skirting the field. Almost at that instant they stopped, and the girl reached up with all her clinging, cloying coquetry and fastened a great, pink wild rose into the lapel of the man's coat. Sagner groaned. "Why can't she keep her hands off that man?" he muttered; then he shrugged his shoulders with a grim little gesture of helplessness. "If a girl doesn't know," he said, "that it's wrong to chase another woman's man she's too ignorant to be congenial. If she does know it's wrong, she's too—vicious. But never mind," he finished abruptly, "Lennart's foolishness will soon pass. And meanwhile Mary has her boy. Surely no lad was ever so passionately devoted to his mother. They are absolutely inseparable. I never saw anything like it." He began to smile again.

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Then, because at a turn of the road he saw a bird that reminded him of a beast that reminded him of a reptile, he left me unceremoniously and went back to the laboratory.

Feeling a bit raw over his desertion, I gave up my walk and decided to spend the rest of the afternoon at the library.

At the edge of the reading-room I found Madge Hubert brandishing a ferocious-looking paper-knife over the perfectly helpless new magazines. With a little cry of delight she summoned me to her by the wave of a *Science Monthly*. Looking over her shoulder I beheld with equal delight that the canny old Science paper had stuck in Sagner's great, ugly face for a frontispiece. At arm's length, with opening and narrowing eyes, I studied the perfect, clever likeness: the convict-cropped hair; the surly, aggressive, relentlessly busy features; the absurd, overwrought, deep-sea sort of eyes. "Great Heavens, Miss Hubert," I said, "did you ever see such a funny-looking man?"

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The girl winced. "Funny?" she gasped. "Funny? Why, I think Bertus Sagner is the most absolutely fascinating-looking man that I ever saw in my life." She stared at me in astonishment.

To hide my emotions I fled to the history room. Somewhat to my surprise Mrs. Lennart and her little lad were there, delving deep into some thrilling grammar-school problem concerning Henry the Eighth. I nodded to them, thought they saw me, and slipped into a chair not far behind them. There was no one else in the room. Maybe my thirst for historical information was not very keen. Certainly every book that I touched rustled like a dead, stale autumn leaf. Maybe the yellow bird in the acacia tree just outside the window teased me a little bit. Anyway, my eyes began only too soon to stray from the text-books before me to the little fluttering wisp of Mrs. Lennart's hair that tickled now and then across the lad's hovering face. I thought I had never seen a sweeter picture than those two cuddling, browsing faces. Surely I had never seen one more entrancingly serene.

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Then suddenly I saw the lad push back his books with a whimper of discontent.

"What is it?" asked his mother. I could hear her words plainly.

"Oh, I wish I had a sister," fretted the boy.

"Why?" said the mother in perfectly happy surprise.

The lad began to drum on the table. "Why do I want a sister?" he repeated a trifle temperishly. "Why, so I could have some one to play with and walk with and talk with and study with. Some one jolly and merry and frisky."

"Why—what about *me*?" she quizzed. Even at that moment I felt reasonably certain that she was still smiling.

The little lad looked bluntly up into her face. "Why you are—*so old!*" he said quite distinctly.

I saw the woman's shoulders hunch as though her hands were bracing against the table. Then she reached out like a flash and clutched the little lad's chin in her fingers. If a voice-tone has any color, hers was corpse-white. "I never—let—*you*—know—that—you—were—too—*young!*" she almost hissed.

And I shut my eyes.

When I looked up again the woman was gone, and the little lad was running after her with a queer, puzzled look on his face.

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Life has such a strange way of foreshortening its

longest plots with a startling, snapped-off ending. Any true story is a tiny bit out of rhetorical proportion.

The very next day, under the railroad trestle that hurries us back and forth to the big, neighboring city, we found Mrs. Lennart's body in a three-foot pool of creek water. It was the little lad's birthday, it seems, and he was to have had a supper party, and she had gone to town in the early afternoon to make a few festive purchases. A package of tinsel-paper bonbons floated safely, I remember, in the pool beside her. For some inexplicable reason she had stepped off the train at the wrong station and, realizing presumably how her blundering tardiness would blight the little lad's pleasure, she had started to walk home across the trestle, hoping thereby to beat the later train by as much as half an hour. The rest of the tragedy was brutally plain. Somehow between one safe, friendly embankment and another she had slipped and fallen. The trestle was ticklish walking for even a person who wasn't lame.

Like a slim, white, waxen altar candle snuffed out by a child's accidental, gusty pleasure-laugh, we brought her home to the sweet, green, peaceful library, with its resolute, indomitable hearthstone.

Out of all the crowding people who jostled me in the hallway I remember only—Lennart's ghastly, agonized face.

"Go and tell Sagner," he said.

Even as I crossed the campus the little, fluttery, flickery, hissing word "suicide" was in the air. From the graduates' dormitory I heard a man's voice argue, "But why did she get off deliberately at the wrong station?" Out of the president's kitchen a shrill tone cackled, "Well, she ain't been herself, they say, for a good many weeks. And who wonders?"

In one corner of the laboratory, close by an open window, I found Sagner working, as I had expected, in blissful ignorance.

"What's the matter?" he asked bluntly.

I was very awkward. I was very clumsy. I was very frightened. My face was all condensed like a telegram.

"Madge Hubert was right," I stammered. "Mrs. Lennart's—business—has gone into the hands of a—receiver."

The glass test tube went brittling out of Sagner's fingers. "Do you mean that she is—dead?" he asked.

I nodded.

For the fraction of a moment he rolled back his great, shaggy brows, and lifted his face up wide-eyed and staring to the soft, sweet, dove-colored, early evening sky. Then his eyelids came scrunching down again perfectly tight, and I saw one side of his ugly mouth begin to smile a little as a man might smile—as he closes the door—when the woman whom he loves comes home again. Then very slowly, very methodically, he turned off all the gas-burners and picked up all the notebooks, and cleansed all the knives, and just as I thought he was almost ready to go with me he started back again and released a fair, froth-green lunar moth from a stifling glass jar. Then, with his arm across my cringing shoulders, we fumbled our way down the long, creaky stairs. And all the time his heart was pounding like an oil-soused engine. But I had to bend my head to hear the questions that crumbled from his lips.

As we crunched our way across the Lennarts' garden with all the horrible, rackety noise that the living inevitably make in the presence of the dead, we ran into Lennart's old gardener crouching there in the dusk, stuffing cold, white roses into a huge market basket. Almost brutally Sagner clutched the old fellow by the arm. "Dunstan," he demanded, "how—did—this—thing—happen?"

The old gardener shook with fear and palsy. "There's some," he whispered, "as says the lady-dear was out of her mind. A-h, no," he protested, "a-h, no. She may ha' been out of her heart, but she weren't never out of her mind. There's some," he choked, "as calls it suicide, there's some," he gulped, "as calls it accident. I'm a rough-spoke man and I don't know the tongue o' ladies, but it weren't suicide, and it weren't accident. If it had be'n a man that had done it, you'd 'a' called it just a 'didn't-give-a-damn.'"

As we neared the house Sagner spoke only once. "Barney," he asked quite cheerfully, "were you ever rude to a woman?"



"Oh, I wish I had a sister," fretted the boy

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My hands went instinctively up to my head. "Oh, yes," I hurried, "once in the Arizona desert I struck an Indian squaw."

"Does it hurt?" persisted Sagner.

"You mean 'Did it hurt?'" I answered a bit impatiently. "Yes, I think it hurt her a little, but not nearly as much as she deserved."

Sagner reached forward and yanked me back by the shoulder. "I mean," he growled, "do you remember it now in the middle of the night, and are you sorry you did it?"

My heart cramped. "Yes," I acknowledged, "I remember it now in the middle of the night. But I am distinctly not sorry that I did it."

"Oh," muttered Sagner.

With the first creaking sound of our steps in the front hall "Little Sister" came gliding down the stairway with the stark-faced laddie clutching close at her sash. All the sparkle and spangle were gone from the girl. Her eyes were like two bruises on the flesh of a calla lily. Slipping one ice-cold tremulous hand into mine she closed down her other frightened hand over the two. "I'm so very glad you've come," she whispered huskily. "Mr. Lennart isn't any comfort to me at all to-night—and Mary was the only sister I had." Her voice caught suddenly with a rasping sob. "You and Mr. Sagner have always been so kind to me," she plunged on blindly, with soft-drooping eyelids, "and I shall probably never see either of you again. We are all going home to-morrow. And I expect to be married in July to a boy at home." Her icy fingers quickened in mine like the bloom-burst of a sun-scorched Jacqueminot.

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"You—expect—to—be—married—in—July to—a—boy—at—home?" cried Sagner.

The awful slicing quality in his voice brought Lennart's dreadful face peering out through a slit in the library curtains.

"Hush!" I signaled warningly to Sagner. But again his venomous question ripped through the quiet of the house.

"You—expected—all—the—time—to—be—married—in—July?"

"Why, yes," said the girl, with the faintest dimpling flicker of a smile. "Won't you congratulate me?" Very softly she drew her right hand away from me and held it out whitely to Sagner.

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"Excuse me," said Sagner, "but I have just—washed—my—hands."

"What?" stammered the girl. "W-h-a-t?"

"Excuse—me," said Sagner, "but I have just—washed my hands."

Then, bowing very, very low, like a small boy at his first dancing-school, Sagner passed from the house.

When I finally succeeded in steering my shaking knees and flopping feet down the long front steps and the pleasant, rose-bordered path, I found Sagner waiting for me at the gateway. Under the basking warmth of that mild May night his teeth were chattering as with an ague, and his ravenous face was like the face of a man whose soul is utterly glutted, but whose body has never even so much as tasted food and drink.

I put both my hands on his shoulders. "Sagner," I begged, "if there is anything under God's heaven that you want to-night—go and get it!"

He gave a short, gaspy laugh and wrenched himself free from me. "There is nothing *under* God's heaven—to-night—that I want—except Madge Hubert," he said.

In another instant he was gone. With a wh-i-r and a wh-i-s-h and a snow-white fragrance, his trail cut abruptly through the apple-bush hedge. Then like a huge, black, sweet-scented sponge the darkening night seemed to swoop down and wipe him right off the face of the earth.

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Very softly I knelt and pressed my ear to the ground. Across the young, tremulous, vibrant greensward I heard the throb-throb-throb of a man's feet—*running*.

Transcriber's Note:

Obvious punctuation errors were corrected.

[Page 257](#), two lines of text were transposed. The original read:

one of our big music people picked him up

jabberingly to America. But the invitation didn't
over there a few months ago and brought him
seem to include the wife and baby--genius and

The middle two lines were traded.

The remaining corrections made are indicated by dotted lines under the
corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will
appear.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SICK-A-BED LADY ***

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