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Author: Clara Morris

Illustrator: Howard Chandler Christy

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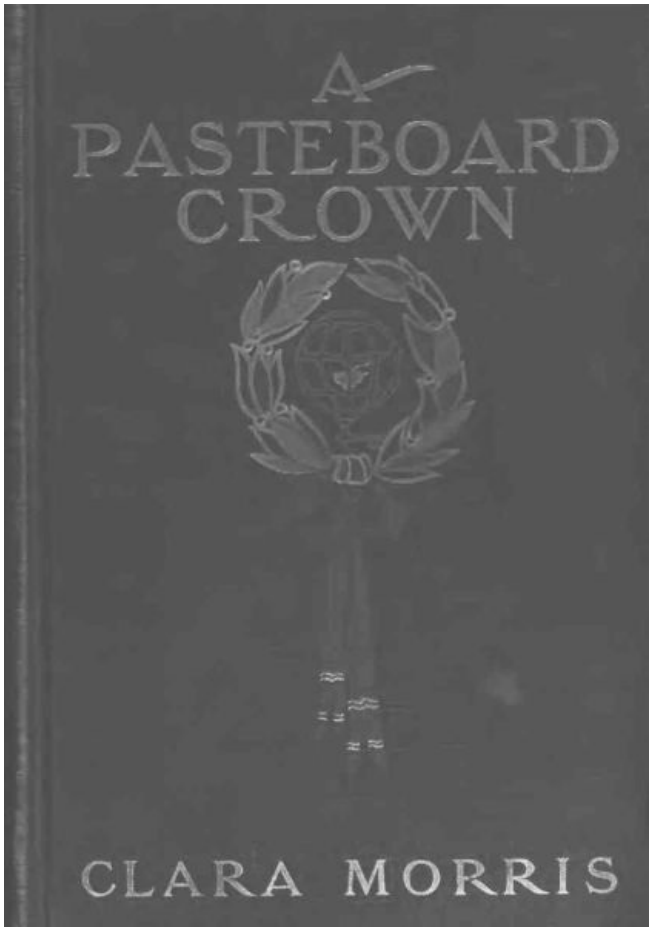

A PASTEBOARD

CROWN

"I will place the crown upon your head," said the actor-manager; "only promise not to reproach me when you find for yourself that it is only pasteboard!"

A PASTEBOARD CROWN

A Story of the New York Stage

BY

CLARA MORRIS

Author of "Life on the Stage," etc.

WITH A FRONTISPIECE FROM A DRAWING BY HOWARD CHANDLER CHRISTY

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

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1902

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CROWN

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CHAPTER I

THE LAWTONS ARRIVE

It was on a Monday, the 30th of April, that the boys with the grocers' and butchers' delivery wagons, the gray-uniformed postmen behind their bony, always-tired horses, and the blue-coated, overfed mounted policemen began to circulate the report that the old White house had found a tenant; and every soul that listened made answer: "Impossible! No one could live in that old rookery!" and then, with incredible inconsistency, ended with: "Who's taken it?"

At first no answer could be given to that question, but later in the day a man who strung telegraph wires won a brief importance through overhearing a conversation between two men standing below him and beside the pole he was mounted on. One man was Jacob Brewer, who now owned the old White estate, and the other he ascertained, by careful listening, to be John Lawton; and he learned that Mr. Lawton was to take possession of the old house the next day, which would be May 1st, the conventionally correct day for moving.

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Through the usual suburban channels this bit of information was put into circulation and swiftly reached every householder in the village—to say nothing of outlying farmhouses. And everywhere women with towels about their heads—sure sign that the house-cleaning microbe is abroad in the land—could be seen talking over back fences to neighbors whose fingers were still puckered from long immersion in the family wash-tub, and the name Lawton and such disjointed exclamations as: "Who?" "Why—how many do you suppose?" and "Did you ever hear of such a thing?" filled the warm air, even as the frail, inconsequent little May-flies filled it.

The telegraph lineman over his noon beer told many times what old Brewer had called the stranger: "Lawton—yes, John Lawton—was the name, and he was coming up the next day; yes, come to think of it, he had said *they* were coming—so there was a family of some sort." The letter-carrier, in leaving the mail, paused a moment to catch these last words, and at his next stopping-place he was enabled to leave with a letter the information that "John Lawton, who had taken that roofless old sheebang, had a family coming with him"; and the lady informed made sure "he would not have a family very long, if he tried to keep them in that mouldering old ruin." Doctors hearing the news exchanged jests as they met on the roads, one opining that "some business was coming their way and that quinine would soon be in demand," while another, always a pessimist, said that "any one that was poor enough to take the White house to live in was too hard up to pay a doctor." [Pg 3]

But really, no one knowing anything about the old place could help having a feeling of amazement at hearing of a tenant being found for it. It was that saddest, most uncanny thing—a deserted house. A great, big, Colonial-like frame structure, it stood high on the hillside, showing white and ghostly between the too-closely set evergreens and conifers before it. That money had been lavished upon the place in the distant past was evident even in these very trees, which were the choicest of their kind. He who had planted them must have been a melancholy man. Drooping, mournful trees seemed particularly to appeal to him, for the very rare weeping hemlock, like a black fountain, was there as well as the weeping larch, with its small cones; and a veritable army of white pines, Norway spruces, balsam firs, and the red cedar that in its blackish stateliness is so like the Irish yew. A solemn company at the best of times, when properly spaced and trimmed, but now with unpruned branches intertwining, the trees that were killing one another in their struggle for light were positively lugubrious. And behind that screen of matted, many-shaded evergreen the pallid, bony old house stood trembling under high winds, while its upper windows stared blankly down upon that Broadway that, escaping from the hurrying city with its millions of restless feet, here passed calmly on, by woodland and green meadows, toward distant Albany.

The cruel roadway had swept away with it all the footsteps that had used to make life in the old house. Two great gates were let into the stone wall. One was locked so securely that even a burglar might have failed to solve the combination of a ten years' twisted leafy growth of [Pg 4] woodbine; but whenever anyone wished to enter the grounds he went to the second gate, which was easily opened by the simple process of throwing it down and walking over it. Grass grew in tufts down the old carriage drive, and all about the lower part of the house were curious stains that looked as though little green waves had washed up against it, while on the north side the long streaks of green beneath the windows painfully suggested tear-marks on its white old face. A melancholy and unwholesome place for people to seek a home in, and yet the morning's report proved reliable, for Jacob Brewer's handy man had been over to the old White house, as people would call it, because Peter White had lived and died there years ago, and had cleared up a bit; had secured two or three hanging shutters, put a swing-door in the kitchen and a bolt on the front door, and had tacked on to the mighty body of an ancient willow—a landmark for miles about that grew directly by the unhinged gate—a strip of black painted tin, bearing in gold letters the word "Woodsedge"—and lo! the old house was ready for the new tenant.

Promptly the Lawtons arrived upon the scene the next day, preceded by a furniture van under the directorship of a very young, very rumpled, but most optimistic German maid-of-all-work, who proudly carried a large key in her hand as a symbol of authority. She had unlocked and thrown wide the creaking front door, opened the windows, made a fire in the kitchen, and had undone the bundle she had carried in her lap all the way from the city, revealing to the astonished men a [Pg 5] small black tea-kettle.

"Oh, ja! I carry him mysel', und den I have him alretty und can make quick de tea for de mistress —right so soon as she gits here!"

And before the van had been emptied a dust-covered hack arrived, with four people inside and several boxes and a trunk sharing the top with the driver. A mounted policeman, loitering along Broadway and watching the debarkation, saw John Lawton—tall and thin and almost white-haired, a gentleman without a doubt—descending. Then an elderly lady, with surprisingly red cheeks glowing through a dotted veil, followed, and then—"Oh, by Jove!" muttered the blue-coat, as out sprang, one after the other, the two young girls, as fresh and bright and full of bubbling laughter as the day was bright and full of sunshine and bird song. Suddenly a voice cried: "Sybil —O Sybil, take care—you've broken the package of bird seed!"

And with a laugh the girl addressed caught up her skirt to save the falling seeds, revealing as she did so a pair of pretty feet, that presently began to dance wildly about as their owner cried: "Dorothy—O Dorothy! did you see it—a robin? it's over there!"

And up went two veils, and two young faces turned eagerly toward the spot where Mr. Robin, with black cap, yellow bill, and orange-red breast, sat and looked at them with round black eyes, quite unmoved by their human beauty, as was right and proper—seeing that he was himself a bridegroom just settling in life. But the policeman suddenly put his horse to the gallop, and in an [Pg 6] hour's time everyone in the village knew that the Lawtons had arrived, that they were gentlefolk, and that the two girls were "regular beauties." While at Woodsedge, secure in the privacy the screening evergreens provided, the Lawtons turned to and assisted the small German maid in setting up their somewhat battered household gods upon the altars that had been so long empty and cold in that sad old house.

As Mrs. Lawton crossed the sagging porch the front door was held open by Lena, who, curtseying and smiling her widest, flattest smile, told her that "She was com' at de right place und she vas velcom' alretty as anyt'ing," the dignity of this reception being somewhat marred by the fact that Lena was hooking herself up as she spoke, she having hastily exchanged her Sunday clothes for her working ones.

"Ah," moaned the welcomed mistress to her following husband and daughters, "in former years my butler and housekeeper would have received me, and with their clothes all on" (the girls choked audibly), "but," sighed Mrs. Lawton, "that was before your poor misguided father had lost everything for us!"

"Including the servants' clothes," whispered Dorothy, and with a "Poor papa!" each girl gave him a pat on the arm as, passing him by, they took hold of their mother, and with much loving bustle got her bonnet and veil and gloves and beady mantle off and put her into the only chair yet brought into the house, where, with a soap-box beneath her feet, she could sit and comfortably give directions that no one heeded, and scold people who were unconscious that they were the [Pg 7] objects of her wrath. Some shades were up, two carpets were down, and a gruesome old piano stood, glooming, from one end of the sitting-room, before the girls would consent to have lunch, for, said Sybil, "That piano, that noble instrument of perfect tone and action, standing outside on the grass, was a direct challenge to Heaven to send down rain."

"My dear," mildly remonstrated Mr. Lawton, "don't be sarcastic."

"John!" interrupted Mrs. Lawton, "I don't see why you should accuse the child of being sarcastic. You must remember that in about the seventies some of our greatest pianists sat before that instrument, which was one of my many wedding gifts, and Sybil very reasonably called it a piano of perfect tone and action. You should not be so ready to criticise your children, John. Oh, I do hope that tea is going to be strong, my dears, for I am positively beyond speech." A declaration which lost considerable of its force when she continued to describe the glorious past of her rosewood monster, until she was silenced momentarily by a cup of strong tea. For, camping in all the wild confusion of boxes and bundles, they proceeded to enjoy a luncheon of bread and butter and chipped dried beef, with the soul-reviving accompaniment of fragrant though forbidden green tea. Just as Mrs. Lawton, groaning over the thickness of the bread, was starting out to describe the transparent thinness of the slices cut by some bondwoman of the past, Lena, all smiles, came tramping in with a boiled egg in a shaving-mug: [Pg 8]

"Youst for de mistress," she announced, and placed the mug on that lady's knee. "Dat's youst laid fresh dis minute alretty. Wat you t'ink of dat, eh?"

"But—but!" flustered Mr. Lawton, "that doesn't belong to us—we have no hens!"

"No," acquiesced Lena, "but dot hen she nest on us—so I tak' dot egg!"

"Well, that's dishonest!" declared Mr. Lawton.

"Nein! nein!" contradicted Lena, who always grew more German in excitement: "Uf it is tree egg—four—six egg, dot may make of de steal—but youst one eggs only pay for de use of de nest!" And Lena made a triumphant exit to the laughter of the girls and a thrill of song from the canary on the mantel-piece, who dearly loved a noise.

Meantime Mrs. Lawton, untroubled by questions of right or wrong, enjoyed the fresh egg without even a word of protest against the shaving-mug accompaniment. As she wiped her lips, she asked, suddenly: "Girls, where on earth are your dear grandparents?"

"Under the piano," promptly replied Sybil, who was worrying a tough chip of beef between her white teeth.

Dorothy giggled hysterically, while John Lawton exclaimed: "Sybil, are you absolutely without reverence?"

"Why, papa," replied the indomitable Sybil, "I'm sure the old people are better off under the piano than they would have been lying with the tables and chairs in the grass out there, a temptation to Lena's fairy footsteps. We'll hang the old people up as soon as we finish our luncheon. They had [Pg 9] better stay in this room—don't you think so, mamma?" And Mrs. Lawton again took up the proffered thread of direction and never laid it down till she at the same moment laid her head upon her pillow.

After that picnicky luncheon Mr. Lawton betook himself to the village to hunt up the butcher, the baker, and, if not the candle-stick maker, at least his successor, the gas man. Firmly rejecting the piece of string Mrs. Lawton wished to tie about his thumb as an assistance to his somewhat unreliable memory, he rearranged his thin locks with the aid of a pocket-comb, tightly buttoned his well-fitting, seedy old coat, and with a warm young kiss on either cheek sallied forth, pursued by his wife's warning cry: "Candles—candles! Now, John, no matter what they promise at the gas-store, gas-house—er—er, I mean office—don't I, girls? Oh, well, no matter what *anyone* promises, *anywhere*, do you buy some candles for fear of accidents, for light we must have! Food for to-morrow is desirable, but light for to-night is an absolute necessity! So get candles, for fear——"—then, as John disappeared, "Do you suppose your father understood?" she asked, anxiously.

"Why—er! why—er!" hesitated Sybil, as she gently rubbed the canvas that preserved Grandmamma Bassett's antique prettiness: "Dorothy—what is the condition of papa's intelligence

at present?"

But Dorothy, passing an armful of bed linen to the waiting Lena, soothingly declared: "It's no fault of yours, mamma dear, if he does not understand—I'm sure you tried hard enough," and [Pg 10] Mrs. Lawton, bridling and important, at once followed Lena upstairs to make things interesting for that handmaiden. As soon as they were alone the girls looked ruefully at each other, and Dorothy exclaimed: "Fancy sending papa on such an errand!"

"Yes," groaned Sybil, "it *is* funny—and oh, if he could only throw a little light on the family finances, I'd forgive him if we all lay in total darkness to-night. Dorrie! Dorrie! what are we coming to? Is not this an awful place? I would not say a word against it before poor papa—he seems so proud of his bargain. But, Dorrie, we'll all find our teeth rattling like castanets some fine morning, and chills mean quinine, and quinine means money—money!"

Dorothy sat down dejectedly on a step of the ladder and pushed her sunny brown hair back from her damp forehead. "Yes—it is dreadful! We must put mamma and papa in the driest room and see what the cellar is like, and perhaps we may find some boy about who will cut away some of those branches and let a little sunlight in on this window that I see mamma has marked for her own. A little shaking and shivering won't matter so much for us, Sybil. We are young and can stand it, but papa is not strong and fever would simply eat him up, poor dear!"

Sybil bent suddenly, and, kissing her sister's cheek: "You're a patient little soul, Dorrie," she said, "but I tell you I shall go mad presently over this never-ending mending and turning and dyeing, this wearing of each other's clothes, this mad effort to keep up appearances! Why can't we do [Pg 11] something as other girls do—who help themselves?"

"Ah, but mamma!" interposed Dorothy. "She would never consent. We are ladies, you know, dear, and——"

"Idiots!" savagely completed Sybil, "who don't know how to do one single thing well. I can paint—a little; you can play—a little. We both can sing—a little, and we both can dance perfectly!"

And she flung her arm about Dorothy's slim waist and together they went waltzing out into the old hall, their light, swaying figures skimming swallow-like over the sunken porch and out into the sunshine, where presently a great brown root tripped them up, and they fell, a laughing heap, on the moss. Next instant two excited voices were crying: "Violets! Oh, real violets!" And with fingers trembling with haste, and eyes wide with delight, they gathered the timid little hooded darlings of the spring, forgetting their poverty, their makeshifts, and their anxieties, as God meant young things should forget at times, and only remembering that they were sisters, who loved each other and had found out there under the sky their first bed of sweet wild violets. [Pg 12]

CHAPTER II

A POWERFUL NEIGHBOR

It was near the end of the week. Already Woodsedge seemed to have wakened, drawn a long breath, and assumed that pleasant expression so earnestly sought for by generations of photographers. In fact, the old house had taken on a homelike look, and both the girls had been sewing at break-needle speed trying to finish some muslin curtains that they wished to have put up in their own room before Sunday, as those windows were in full view of Broadway drivers, and they felt that propriety demanded muslin curtains as well as shades. And this, according to Lena, was "Friday alretty," so together they were driving Dick, the canary, nearly wild by singing against him over their work, when John Lawton, wearing an ancient alpaca coat and a mournful and repentant straw hat, appeared upon the porch clasping a left finger in a very bloody right hand; remarking, with his usual moderation of speech: "I think I have got a cut."

"Do you, indeed?" Sybil snapped, as she rushed for an old handkerchief. "I suppose a severed artery would about convince you of the fact! Bring me a bit of thread, Dorrie! Oh, you white-faced goose, that screech of yours has brought mamma!" And mamma was followed by the ever-faithful [Pg 13] Lena. And so it happened that Mr. Lawton's injured finger drew to his service four devoted women. Sybil, first pouring some fair water over the cut, proceeded to bandage it with a bit of old linen. Dorothy, keeping her face averted, held out a spool of white silk. Lena, with a trail of rejected cobweb in one hand and an enormous pair of shears in the other, waited to cut the thread off; while Mrs. Lawton, with eye-glasses on nose, superintended Sybil's efforts and sagely advised her that if she wound the bandage too tight it would stop circulation, and if it were too loose it would come off, and——

"And if I should get it just right, what would happen, mamma?" meekly questioned the girl.

"Why—why—er," confusedly stammered Mrs. Lawton, "why—really I——"

"Your mother can't conceive the idea of anything being just right, this side of our heavenly home, my dear," gravely remarked her husband, which was unexpected, not to say ungrateful.

"John!" sternly spoke the lady, "instead of jeering at the wife of your bosom in the presence of your children——"

"There, mamma washes her hands of us, you see, Dorrie," interposed Sybil; but Mrs. Lawton went straight on:

"—you would do well, first, to remember that though I have lost my illusions, I have not neglected my religious duties, and next to explain what you were about to get a cut shaped like that?"

"O observant mamma!" laughed Sybil, while Lena remarked, with unconscious impertinence: "I tink dot cut make himself mit a sickle alretty. Ain't dot so, my Herr Mister?" [Pg 14]

"Oh, papa," cried both girls, "you were never trying to cut the grass yourself, were you?"

"Why not?" asked the old gentleman. "It needs it badly, and it will be a bit of change saved if I can do it myself."

"Nein! nein!" cried Lena, indignantly. "I make mit de sickles myself by and bye, ven I got of de times. I vork youst so well as any mans on de grass! Dot is not for you, my Herr Mister; dot is for me. Und you don't see alretty yet vat I got in dose gartens. You come with me, Miss Ladies—I show!" and all one broad, flat laugh, she led Sybil and Dorothy to the rear of the house, and proudly pointed to a freshly dug garden bed.

"Why!" cried they, "who did it?" and "Oh, Lena, did you make a bargain beforehand?" asked the sadly experienced young Dorothy.

But Lena laughed and laughed and pounded her knee so vigorously that the girls fairly winced at sight of the blows. Then joyously, if slangily, she explained: "Dot mash-man, he do dot diggins—youst for me. Und he say he do more to-morrow. Und Sunday I rake 'em fine, dot bed, und put in der seeds, und behold, der vill be a garten one of dose days. Vat you tink, eh?"

Both the girls had very bright eyes. They looked at each other. Sybil started to unfasten the pretty belt she wore, but Dorothy shook her head warningly, then put her hand up and drew from her hair a little side-comb. [Pg 15]

"Wait!" cried Sybil, and she took out one of hers, and with much laughter saw Lena proudly place the combs in her own flaxen locks; and as the maid returned to her endless work, Sybil exclaimed: "What a nature! what a good-hearted creature!"

"And yet," laughed Dorothy, "how mercenary in her treatment of her 'mash-man'! Oh, Sybil, where do you suppose she got that word? Poor thing, I did not dare let you give her the belt, dear, because we have but the one between us, just now. But here is the other comb—yes, take it! Your hair is heavier than mine. Oh, Sybil, darling girl, don't, oh, don't cry! Things will come right, somehow—only wait!"

"I can't! I—I won't!" cried Sybil. "The shame, the mortification of accepting help from that poor, overworked little German girl, who coquets with a laborer for our benefit—oh, it sickens one! Dorrie, I'm going to tell papa, right out, straight and plain, that I'm going on the stage! There—I can at least earn my own living, if I can't win fame. I know he will be terribly upset, but I'll say—that——"

"Suppose," gently suggested the practical Dorothy, "that we finish the curtains, Sybil dear, and you can tell me all about what you intend saying to papa while we sew!"

When, twenty-five years ago, "all in the merry month of May," John Lawton had married Letitia Bassett, there had not been wanting at the wedding-feast one or two of those distant relatives who generally make such unwelcome guests; since not near enough to be known and loved, yet not distant enough to be ignored, they are very apt to amuse themselves by keeping tab on the bride's birthdays and the groom's debts, while with suspicious glances they closely search the wedding gifts for something plated. Grandaunt Lucilla and old James Baker, with blood chilled against the kindly influence of sparkling champagne or rare good sherry, had that day peered into the future with wise old eyes, and, foreseeing, had mumblingly foretold the financial ruin that was now full upon John Lawton. Of those who heard the croaking of the ancient pair the most indignant had been Nellie Douglass—bridesmaid and intimate of Letitia Lawton. She cried: "Shame," to Grandaunt Lucilla, "for prophesying evil upon one of her own blood, and the very handsomest bride the Bassetts had ever led to altar-rail and expectant groom. But then, it was just crass envy and malice that moved her, unmarried at seventy-five, to such wicked speech—ruin indeed!" And she tossed her flower-wreathed head, as she glanced about at the lavish decorations, at the newly added shelf, circling the library walls, to accommodate the many late-coming wedding gifts: "Only—only, she wished now, more than ever, that Letitia had not been a May bride, and had not wound all those lovely pearls around her slender throat! What on earth had made her so reckless? it was risky enough to say 'Yes,' without winding yourself up in pearls and saying it in May!" [Pg 16]

But certain men who heard the prophesy looked over at the wealthy bridegroom, and, noting the dimpled, pointed chin, the wide-apart blue eyes, with their absent expression, they thought of the far-away coffee plantations that had come with the fortune they had already made into his helpless looking hands, and shook their heads, fearing old man Baker's saying might yet come true. Lawton had come to New York on a matter of business connected with those plantations, and, instead of devoting himself to that and returning at once, he fell head over heels in love and straightway married, and as his bride was of a very fair complexion and dreaded the sun, and was very fond of society and dreaded loneliness, she simply could not go to South America with him; and when once he bravely tried to go alone back to his duty, she indulged in such an hysterical [Pg 17]

outburst of temper and grief combined as did herself serious injury at the time, and ended at once and forever his personal management of the plantations.

They were both outrageously extravagant—not in a gross, flaunting way, desiring the pained humiliation of those less fortunate than themselves, but in a way that showed an almost childish ignorance of the value of money. John Lawton, Sr., had been a shrewd, far-sighted, honorable man, a hard worker, who held fast to what he earned until it could earn too. Strong and self-denying, he yet fathered a son who seemed to have been born for the express purpose of being fleeced. Honest, honorable, temperate, moral, without a single vice, possessing most of the virtues, he was nevertheless that piteous creature—the well-intentioned but unsuccessful man. [Pg 18]

After the plantations had gently slipped away from him he did not attempt to retrench. He loved his wife; he had not the heart to deny her anything; also he remembered the hysterical outburst and a tiny, tiny little grave, and he—well, he dared not suggest even a slight change in their style of living, but he did decide that something must be found to take the place of the money-yielding coffee plantations. Hence it followed that for some years there were few salted mines, whether of gold or silver; few gushing oil-wells, located miles outside of the oil belt; few Eden-like land-booms in Southern swamps, that had not found in John Lawton an eager purchaser of shares. Some fine corner lots in the business centre of a Western city—built entirely on paper—were his last, large, losing investment. After that he dribbled away the few dollars left to him in helping to secure patents for such useless inventions as an ink-well with automatic cover that was meant to keep the ink from evaporating, but failed to do it. A dish-washing machine looked like a winner, until he found it was apt suddenly to go wrong and crush more dishes in a moment than the most impetuous Bridget would destroy in a week. And a cow-milker had lately absorbed the money that should have gone for walking boots. Each time he was deceived he was as greatly surprised as he had been on the first occasion; then, sadly gathering up his worthless shares, he tied them neatly together with pink tape, labelled them, laid them aside—and was ready to be taken in again. In all these foolish investments he was actuated solely by love for his family. There was no taint of selfishness underlying his desire to regain a lost fortune. He suffered twice to their once, since he [Pg 19] felt every one of their privations in addition to his own. In his slow way he had come to understand that his weakness had brought about the family's downfall. He had not been strong enough to hold what he had once possessed, and even when he knew they were rushing to destruction, he had not been strong enough to put the brakes down hard. He said little—almost nothing; but there were times when his wife thought him sleeping when he sat with closed eyes thanking God for that tiny grave which held his only son, for had he lived a weakling like himself he might have carried the good old name down to no one knows what depths; while the girls, such good girls, such pretty girls they were, would doubtless marry some time, and so the name would pass, would be forgotten; and the absent look would be very marked, when his pale blue eyes opened again. The poor, tender-hearted, gullible old gentleman!

That Grandaunt Lucilla, who at their wedding feast had prophesied ruin within twenty years for the Lawtons, had lived long enough to see the seeds of extravagance sown by them take root, develop stalk and stem, and blossom forth into many mortgages—for stranger hands to gather; so, leaving her savings to that "tinkling cymbal of humanity," as she called her grandniece, Letitia Lawton, she first secured the legacy with so many legal knots and seals and witnesses and things, that it simply could not be squandered by one Lawton, nor invested by the other; and now it was to that small inheritance that they clung for their lives. [Pg 20]

The family's position was most painful, but the girls suffered most. In the past John and Letitia had danced long and merrily, so it was but fair that they should now "pay the piper," but Sybil and Dorothy, for all their warm young blood and springy feet, danced not, for their hands were empty, and there was no one to "pay the piper" for them. Poor things, they could remember when their fine feathers had made them very fine little birds, indeed; when they had taken their walks abroad under the care of a voluble French nurse. They could remember, too, the day their pretty, ever-talkative mamma had refused to go to church with but one man on the carriage box. Then there had come a time when there was no man and no carriage and no French maid. Then flittings followed, and after each one fewer friends had followed them, and the last flitting had brought them here, to the old White house, or to Woodsedge, as Mrs. Lawton sternly commanded all to call it; and no old friends seemed likely to follow them out of the land of plenty, while it was too soon yet to know whether they would find new friends in the desert. So they could only make the best appearance possible and rush up their bedroom curtains. And as they worked, Sybil, the impetuous, with flushing cheeks, told Dorothy, who steadily turned-down and hemmed, how impossible it was for her to do anything but act; how sure she was she could act; how clearly she was going to put the case before papa. And then Dorothy wished to know how Sybil was going to get into a theatre—a really nice theatre was not so easily entered. For herself, she would rather try to write—then you could send your manuscript to the publishers and not go outside of your [Pg 21] own home— "That is," she added, reluctantly, "if—you have plenty of stamps."

And just then John Lawton lowered the paper he had been reading, as he sat at the far end of the porch, and asked: "Girls, have you noticed a young woman who rides past here on horseback evenings, generally without a groom?"

"Yes!" cried the girls. "Sometimes she comes scrambling down that rocky lane below us," said Sybil, "but she never does that on the big chestnut—he'd break his legs."

"Nice horse, that," commented Mr. Lawton. "But do you know who she is?"

"No, papa, do you?" asked Dorothy, turning the last hem.

"Y—e—s," was the slow answer. "I was looking at the swelling on the leg of that black police-horse last night, and I told him—the policeman, I mean—that a bandage was needed, and just then along came the young woman, riding a small bay at almost a dead run. I thought at first there was work for the policeman to do, but the rider touched her cap as she rushed past, and the officer guessed my thought, for he said: 'No; that ain't no runaway! I suspect the bay's been a bit unruly; anyway, she never rides at such a spanking gait as that except in the cool of the evening and when the roads are quiet.' He seemed to know the lady so well that I asked if she lived in the neighborhood, and he said: 'Why, good Lord! Don't you know who she is? Why, that's Claire Morrell, the actress.'" [Pg 22]

With a cry Sybil sprang to her feet, wide-eyed and palpitating with excitement, while Dorothy exclaimed, reproachfully: "Oh, papa, why did you not tell us before? Where does she live? Now don't say you don't know and so reduce us to the necessity of interviewing the policeman for ourselves!"

Mr. Lawton gently pinched his bandaged finger, to see how much it was hurt, before answering: "Miss Morrell, who is Mrs. Barton in private life, you know, lives as the crow flies exactly opposite us on Riverdale Avenue, at a place called The Beeches."

"Oh! oh!" cried Dorothy. "Let's go and tell mamma whom she has for a neighbor—she will be so interested! She used to be quite proud of living near a former residence of Miss Kemble, the English actress. Come, Sybil dear—why, are you asleep?" For her sister had been standing, staring dumbly into space. Now she leaned forward and whispered, rapidly:

"Dorrie! Dorrie! Here is the answer to your question, and here is my one chance! This woman has power to help me, and she shall use it—yes, if I have to go upon my knees to her! Her hand shall open to me the stage-door of the theatre!" [Pg 23]

CHAPTER III

SHOPPING UNDER DIFFICULTIES

Early in their second week at Woodsedge it became evident that someone would have to go to the city to do some very necessary shopping, and a great gloom descended and enwrapped the Lawtons in consequence. The ancient legend says that the prospect of a shopping expedition ever fills the female soul with wild, unreasoning joy, which is a too general and too positive prediction. But that is the trouble with most legends, composed as they are of a little truth, much imagination, and more sweeping assertion; and I have no doubt this last irritating quality has caused the destruction of many a legend that was both beautiful and poetic. Now, fable to the contrary notwithstanding, shopping is not an unalloyed joy—always fatiguing—often a positive penance. It is sometimes a pleasure, and on rare occasions it may become an absolute delight, say, for instance, when a woman is young and pretty and has a full purse. The knowledge of her own beauty and her ability to adorn it will make the selecting, the choosing, the trying, the adapting, the decision, the retraction, the fluttering, and the hesitating—all delightful. Or when a woman who has herself passed the period of coquettish dressing shops from a full purse for those she loves, whose tastes and desires she knows perfectly, with what beaming eyes she will hover over the best, the rarest, comparing, selecting without a thought of price, only seeking beauty and quality—such shopping is unqualified pleasure. [Pg 24]

But the gates of this shopping Paradise were closed against the Lawtons, and Sybil and Dorothy, like two made-over, rebound, cotton-backed little Peris, stood and wept as they shook vainly at the bars. Mr. Lawton had in all good faith offered to go to the city and do their errands for them, but his services had been promptly declined, though with many qualifying pats and strokes from Sybil and a violet boutonnière from Dorothy, who had remarked, as she tied it with a blade of grass: "Poor papa—he would come home with barely half the list filled."

"Worse than that," said Sybil. "Poor papa would have come home plucked bare to his innocent old breast."

"Yes!" sighed Dorothy, "someone would surely swindle him out of part of his money, if he went down by his tempting old self."

It was very difficult for the sisters to go out together, because of the lack of appropriate clothing, yet neither one wished to have Mrs. Lawton as a shopping companion. Not that they were lacking in affection for their mother—far from it; but, truth to tell, she was a very silly old person, who, like a certain royal house of France, never learned anything and never forgot anything; and when she walked through the shopping district with her girls, she invariably made them wish they had never been born. She had such a dreadful habit of stopping before some show window and remarking, in a high shrill voice: "Yes, that's fairly good, but it's not to be compared with what I had when," etc., etc. Or she would sit at a counter, and, with eye-glasses on nose, carefully examine forty-cent pairs of cotton stockings, describing meantime to the clerk the exact style of silk stockings she used to wear years before, closing the incident with a condescending: "You may give me three pairs of these—though, to confess the truth, my foot has never yet become accustomed to such coarse web." Small wonder the girls did not care to shop with their mamma. [Pg 25]

Therefore, they had spent an entire day making the preparations that were necessary if they were to go to the city together. Dorothy had pulled apart a black velvet bow from an old hat, steamed it free of wrinkles, and had made a fairly decent belt, and hours had gone to the minute stitching of her gloves; while Sybil's wrath had been aroused by the necessity of inking her purplish boot heels.

"No other shoes but mine go like that," she grumbled. "One would suppose my skirts had teeth to gnaw my heels," and at Dorothy's quick laughter Sybil attacked her with her inky bit of cotton, and their wild struggle so aroused Yellow Dick that he instantly assumed the horrid front of war —quivering his drooping wings, extending his neck, with wee beak open an eighth of an inch wide, and fierce crest rising and lowering rapidly. He felt himself to be a terrifying object, and [Pg 26] nothing short of three fat hemp seeds, held to him between the lovely lips of Sybil could induce him to accept peace.

"What a quick-tempered little wretch Dick has become of late," said Dorothy.

"Oh, well—never mind his small tantrums, so long as he doesn't begin to tell about what a splendid cage he used to have."

"He can't," laughed Dorothy, "for he was hatched as well as brought up in this old cage—he doesn't know any other."

"Thank Heaven for that!" responded Sybil, who then ran to the window, crying:

"There she goes, Dorrie!" and her sister understood at once that "she" was that actress-neighbor of whom Sybil dreamed at night and talked by day. For of late the girl's desire to go upon the stage had developed into a passion. Ardent, romantic, and imaginative as she was, the sweetness of a life of ease and pleasure would probably have smothered the ambition that sharp necessity was now rapidly developing. For it is the almost sterile soil of poverty that oftenest produces the cactus-like plant of Ambition, whose splendid and dazzling flowers are, alas, so often without perfume.

And now Dorothy had John Strange Winter and The Duchess quite to herself evenings, while Sybil thumbed the family Shakspere—a dreadful edition of the fifties, all aflaunt with gilt edges and gilt lettering on the outside, and sprinkled through with most harrowing pictures and libellous and defamatory portraits of Forrest, Cushman, and the rest—for the steel engraver too [Pg 27] "loveth a shining mark."

Looking once at a picture of the "Merry Wives of Windsor"—a blowsy, frowsy, dreadfully decolleté couple—Dorothy had deprecatingly exclaimed: "Oh, Syb, dear! You won't ever have to look like that, will you, if you become an actress?"

"Good heavens, no! Don't be such a goose, Dorrie! Can't you see these are not actresses at all? They are just imaginary pictures of Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page, drawn by some stupid, coarse-minded man!"

And Dorrie, properly snubbed, went back to "Molly Bawn," and left Sybil to rumple her hair and grow very red-cheeked over her study of Juliet—for where is the stage-struck girl who begins with any lesser character? Then, while they brushed their hair and plaited it à la Chinoise for the night, Sybil laid before her sister some wildly impossible plan for making the immediate acquaintance of Claire Morrell, and Dorothy listened to her continual harping on that one string with a gentle patience that was wonderful in one so young. But Dorrie had a firm faith in God's promise to His people—His people being, in her eyes, those who loved Him; and from that faith came the patience that was her strength, and that often supported older members of the family through trying hours.

All being in readiness, it did not take long for the girls to dress for breakfast and for an early start cityward. So, carrying down their hats and gloves and the sunshade they had borrowed over night from Mrs. Lawton, they came laughing into the dining-room, to find that lady trussed up in [Pg 28] her street gown, instead of the usual breakfast jacket, and heard her sharply announce: "I, too, am going to the city this morning!"

"W—why, mamma!" faltered both girls, and then Dorothy turned her blue eyes away, that the rising tears might not be seen.

"But—but I thought everything was all settled last night?" quavered Sybil.

"I can't help last night!" snapped Mrs. Lawton. "This is to-day, and I've got to go down town. Time was when I had not to account for every movement to my own children—when my husband would have risen in his place and forbidden such a humiliating action——"

Now to be just, one must admit that, though very garrulous, Letitia Lawton was not an ill-tempered woman, and this unusual sharpness of tone and word brought utter amazement into the eyes of her daughters. John Lawton's slippered feet shifted uneasily beneath the table: "I'm afraid your coffee will grow cold, my dear!" he murmured.

Sybil ventured to suggest that the shopping list, though long, was simple enough for a child to manage successfully, and just then both girls became aware of something unusual in their mother's appearance—of a sort of toning down—a—a lessening of color—a—not a pallor exactly, but a—why? As they turned troubled, bewildered eyes toward each other, Lena, who always left

them to wait upon themselves at breakfast, while she played femme de chambre upstairs, came stumbling down, volubly defending herself in advance from some unspoken charge and holding something in her closed wet hand: "I no have done dot ting! no, I neffer make mit dot ting! No, neffer! My Miss Ladies! Vunce—youst vunce—I touch dot cork to de tongue—youst dot I see if it vas beet juice alretty, und it vasn't—und I ain't broke nottings! No, my Herr Mister—nottings!" [Pg 29]

"In other days," groaned Mrs. Lawton, "this girl would only have known my scullery!"

"Why, Lena," said Dorothy, "nothing has been broken—so, of course, you cannot be blamed."

"Oh!" cried Lena, desperately, "der mistress's red-cheeks bottle is broked, und I don't do it!"

"Lena!" ejaculated Mrs. Lawton, "leave the room!"

"I show first, den I leave der rooms!" said Lena, tearfully. "See you here, my Miss Ladies," said she, opening her hand. "I find him in der slops-jar—but, I don't neffer break der lady's cheeks-bottle—neffer!—no!"

There, on the wet palm, lay the half of a tiny bottle, whose contents had been red, and on its front still clung the legend "Rouge-Vinaigre." The girls' eyes sank, their faces flushed red all over. This explained the unusual paleness of their mother, the sudden necessity for visiting the city, and the spoiling of their day. A painful silence, broken only by Lena's snuffle, held them for a moment; then Mr. Lawton spoke, almost sternly: "You may go, Lena—I know all about who broke the toilet bottle. Give me my coffee, Letitia."

And then Sybil gave unconscious proof of an ability to act. For, conquering her shamed surprise at learning that her mother painted, she raised calm eyes, and said, in a perfectly matter-of-course way: "Oh, mamma, it's a shame not to feel more sorry for your accident, but I was always a selfish little wretch, and I know right where that lovely store is where all the imported toilet articles are on sale—and oh, dear mamma! if you will only trust me to get your 'vinaigre de toilette' I shall have a chance of seeing all those exquisite shell ornaments, and the Rhinestone hair-pins, and the newest models for hair dressing. Indeed, Dorrie and I might pick up some very useful ideas there." [Pg 30]

Mrs. Lawton hesitated. Sybil's manner of accepting the mortifying discovery as a mere matter of course was certainly comforting, but she "did not think it proper," she said, "for young girls to go into a store and buy r—r—that is, vinaigre de toilette."

"But," urged Sybil, who knew her mother, enjoying perfect health, dearly loved to be treated as an invalid, "the day is going to be a warm one, and the first heat is very trying to one inclined to be delicate."

Mrs. Lawton sighed, and unconsciously drooped a little. Sybil continued: "And bonnet and gloves and corset and walking-boots and all the harness a well-dressed woman has to carry are so fatiguing. And the car-ride after the shopping—you will be used up, mamma!"

And in a burst of self-pity mamma concluded she would best serve the family by conserving her own poor strength. And Dorrie, meantime, under cover of following the flight of an oriole past the window, had dried the shamed tears from her eyes, and her father, cup in hand, discoursing upon the superiority of the Baltimore over the orchard oriole, had screened her from the other two, and had left a pitying kiss on the crown of her bonnie head. And so at last they started for what Sybil called their day of "ninety-nine-and-a-half-cent" shopping. [Pg 31] [Pg 32]

CHAPTER IV

AN ACQUAINTANCE RENEWED

As they came out of the Forty-second Street station they rushed, after the true American fashion, for a Fourth Avenue car. Another followed in two minutes, and had they been German or English they would in leisurely comfort have taken that, but being American they quite needlessly made a breathless rush for the first car, and at its step collided violently with a rotund and florid old male—"glass-of-fashion and mould-of-form." Three "beg pardons" rose simultaneously into the air. Each party drew back deferentially. The conductor, with murder in his eye, yelled fiercely: "Step lively there, will youse!" With beautiful obedience they all sprang forward to a—second collision. Puffing like a porpoise, the old man, hat in hand, gasped apologies to the now helplessly confused girls, until the conductor, with a contemptuous: "Ah—what's the matter wid youse—eider get on or take de nex'," began hauling the girls roughly up the steps with one hand, while with the other he savagely jerked the starting-bell, leaving the man to decide for himself whether to risk his elderly limbs boarding a moving car or to wait for "de nex'" The decision was swiftly made, for, firmly grasping the platform railing, he ran a few steps by the car and then swung himself safely up, in quite a jaunty fashion—for this rakish old beau had determined to keep the girlish young beauties in sight. [Pg 33]

Coming from the station, and each carrying, as he noticed, a small black silk bag, he correctly concluded that, all unattended, they were undertaking a shopping expedition, and he drew himself up with an air and began to twirl his gray mustache, for, relying on their innocence, his

own impressive manner, and the recent contretemps for assistance, he hoped to force an acquaintance—one of those chance acquaintances that, dreaded by all parents, are the absolute bête noir of those mothers who have not been able to teach their young daughters to distinguish between a very courteous reserve and an almost "hail fellow" freedom of speech with amiable strangers. So, it was not long before Sybil, earnestly discussing at what point on their list they should begin, and whether they should leave the car at Twenty-third or at Fourteenth Street, discovered that the overdressed old man opposite was ogling Dorrie outrageously, and her dark eyes flashed indignant glances at him, while she did her best to hold her sister's attention, that she might not be annoyed and shamed by his conduct. This comedy of glances finally caught the attention of a grave-faced young man sitting next to Sybil. He followed the direction of the old man's bold glances, and Dorothy's sweet face held him like a magnet. The rounded cheek, the soft, clear coloring, the sunny, brown hair, the innocent, widely open blue eyes, and the slight lift of the brows, that all unconsciously gave her the pathetic, pleading look that made people ever [Pg 34] eager to serve her, moved him instantly to a feeling of positive gratitude for the other girl who was trying to protect her.

The car had filled rapidly, and people, mechanically hanging themselves each by one hand from the overhead straps, swayed back and forth and trampled alike upon the feet of the just and the unjust, forming a solidly opaque screen between tormentor and tormented. Suddenly the whirr of the wheels and the demoniacal voice of the conductor crying: "Move up there—move up! There's room enough up front, if you'se'll step up to the end!" became faint and far off to the hearing of the grave-faced young man, whose gray eyes had discovered a little knot of wild violets snuggled into one of their own round green leaves and drawn through the button-hole of Dorothy's jacket. Through one dim moment he saw a boy's stumpy brown fist holding out a bunch of "vi'lets" to a sick white hand all netted over with distended blue veins, and heard a thin whispering voice saying: "And mother would have loved them quite as well if her boy had called them 'violets' instead of 'vi'lets,'" and the little blossoms became but a purple blur as he thought with a pang how long that dear admonishing voice had been silent.

The crowd had increased, and Sybil, in bobbing her head this way and that in an effort to see just where they were, became conscious of a young woman standing before her. She was very pale, and great drops of perspiration stood on her hollow temples. She carried a heavy-looking baby in [Pg 35] her arms, and, having no strap to hold to, she reeled and staggered and pitched with every sudden start or jerking stop of the car. Sybil, with a pitying exclamation, rose and gave her place to the poor, sick-looking creature, who, sinking into the seat, raised grateful, tear-filled eyes to the dark, glowing face above her, saying: "It's the baby—he's that heavy, or I wouldn't take it from you, ma'am." Then up sprang the old beau, and offered his place to Sybil, who coldly thanked him, but preferred to stand by her sister. But that was just what he proposed to do himself—to stand by her, and quite naturally to address a few words to that fair sister, and he so far forgot himself as to put his hand on Sybil's arm and try to force her into his seat, when suddenly the grave young man rose, touched the woman with the baby on the shoulder, and said: "Move into my place, please, and allow this young lady to resume her seat." The thing had been done so quickly that there was no time for thought, and the two quick "thank yous" of the girls were followed by a grateful smile and an upward glance of Dorrie's blue eyes straight into the face of the young man, who felt his hand tremble as he lifted his hat and silently made his way through the crowd to the rear platform.

The elderly ogler, meantime, very red as to face and neck, looked out of the window nearest him. The girls, who had been consulting their lists, rose suddenly while he was so occupied, and with several other passengers left the car. The moment he missed them he started to his feet, but as he moved he saw a card fallen on the matting, and stooping picked it up. It was one of Mrs. [Pg 36] Lawton's visiting cards, and on its back was scribbled yards and pounds of various articles, evidently a shopping list. As he turned it over and read "Mrs. John W. Lawton," with a former address crossed off and "Woodsedge" written beneath it, he exclaimed: "The devil! Lawton's girls grown up, and I didn't recognize them? By thunder! I must find them again! Hi! conductor!" He plunged toward the platform, brushing against open papers and stepping on toes without apology, and, dropping off the car, he returned to the corner of the street where the girls had disappeared.

"Lawton's girls!" he muttered. "Woodsedge—where the devil is Woodsedge, I'd like to know! But that blondest girl's a beauty, and no mistake! The dark one glared at me like a cat. Let's see, now, what did they call those youngsters when they were over in the Oranges?" And hunting through his wicked old memory for the names he had forgotten, he placed himself on guard in front of a certain great store, on the chance of seeing Sybil and Dorothy come out. A most undignified occupation for Mr. William Henry Bulkley, aged fifty-five years, worth some eight hundred thousand dollars, but rated as a millionaire. Yet there were certain people in the city who would have expressed no surprise had they seen him so engaged, since they knew the occupation was neither new nor strange to him. He had long retired from business, and now relied principally upon the devil to provide work for his idle hands to do, and it is but fair to admit [Pg 37] that he was seldom without a job. That he was looked upon and spoken of as a millionaire filled him with pride unspeakable. There is not a doubt that from the two hundred thousand dollars with which the world mistakenly accredited him he drew greater satisfaction and delight than from the eight hundred thousand dollars he really owned. So much pleasanter it is to be over, rather than correctly, estimated.

A big man was Mr. Bulkley—whose employees used to call "Old Hulkey"—a heavily breathing

man, who had lost his waist-line years ago, to his great chagrin. He had long yellow teeth, his own beyond a doubt, since no dentist on earth would have risked his reputation by making such an atrocious set. His cheeks sagged, and were of a brick red, netted over with tiny purplish veins. He had pale, impudent blue eyes, and his occasional trick of leering from under half-drooped lids made them offensively ugly. He dressed in the fashion of—to-morrow. No novelty escaped him, and his jewelry was really the best thing about him, since it was genuine and modest.

In the days when he had been a neighbor of the Lawtons, over in the picturesque Orange Mountains, he had had a wife, or, to be more exact, there had been a Mrs. Bulkley, since for many years she had been nothing more to him than an unsalaried housekeeper. His contemptuous indifference as to her knowledge of his infamies deprived her even of the cloak of pretended ignorance with which many a betrayed wife hides her wounded pride and self-respect. So, from a rosy, cheery, happy wife, she had been changed into a pale and silent housekeeper. [Pg 38] Sometimes a certain alleviating friendship exists between a wife and her disloyal husband, but not in this case; for without sympathy there can be no friendship, and there was not a particle of sympathy between the dutiful, pure-minded, humiliated Anna Bulkley and the lax, self-loving, and carnal William H. Bulkley.

So she had folded her lips closely to hide their tendency to tremble, and had borne her lot silently, growing a little paler, a little thinner, a little more retiring year by year, until there came that hottest morning of a long, hot stretch of weather when she failed to descend to breakfast, and her husband had angrily rapped upon her door, declaring that because he wished to go to the city early that day he supposed she meant to sleep forever, and was surprised to find his supposition was an absolutely correct one, for she slept forever. "Heart failure," said the hastily summoned doctor, and doubtless he accurately stated the immediate cause of death, but there were certain women among these lovely country homes who felt sure that the fatal weakness was neither recent nor caused by the summer heat; who believed the poor wife's heart failure dated from the time her husband abandoned home for harem, and by the publicity of his infidelities had made her an object of contemptuous pity. Therefore cold and unfriendly were the glances they cast upon the black-clothed, crêpe-bound widower in their midst.

Now, looking back to that time, he recalled his dead wife's fondness for the little ones of her neighbor's—the bon-bons she always kept at hand, the swing she had put up for her childish [Pg 39] visitors' amusement, and the accident, one day, when the rope broke, and—yes, these very children of Lawton's were the ones that fell; and then quite suddenly he seemed to hear his wife's voice, crying: "Oh, Dorrie, Sibbie, are you hurt?"

With a triumphant laugh he struck his hands together, exclaiming: "I've found them! I've got their names at last! Now, if I can find the girls again in this confounded crowd, I'll have fair sailing!"

But it happened that the girls saw him first, and cleverly avoided him by whipping through a side street over to Sixth Avenue, where, with a sigh for the salads and strawberries of Broadway, they lunched upon coffee and buns in a clean little bakery; for, by so doing and by walking and saving cross-town fares both ways, they were able each to buy a bit of bright ribbon for Lena to turn into the awful bows with which she loved to plaster her honest German breast.

"Poor thing!" sighed Dorothy; "I wish we could get her something worth while!"

"So do I," answered Sybil; "for positively she is the staff of our family at present, and to think that papa should have found her! I believe the one dollar he paid to the intelligence office that day was the only lucky investment of his life!"

"Poor thing!" repeated Dorothy; "I'm afraid she will not walk a primrose path to-day!"

"No!" answered Sybil, "it will not be easy for mamma to forgive that 'cheeks bottle' speech, and Lena will probably hear a good many allusions to sculleries in consequence, or mamma may crush her into speechless awe by suddenly and apropos of nothing telling her that she—the [Pg 40] mistress—once danced in the same room with the Prince of Wales!" And they laughed a little over the old boast as they hastened back to Broadway to secure the new bottle of rouge-vinaigre.

Meantime Mr. Bulkley, who, like most vain men, had a corn or two, had grown weary of watching from the sidewalk, and, swearing a little to himself, had gone to a fashionable restaurant, much favored by women; and, little dreaming that the place was far beyond the means of the girls he sought, he secured a seat near the door, where he sat, and, like a fat old spider, watched for his pretty flies. But they came not, and when he could decently sit there no longer, he cursed just under his breath with an ease and fluency that showed long and earnest practice; then, red and hot with wine and anger, he paid his bill and went out, quite forgetting that truthful old saying, "The devil takes care of his own," until his infernal majesty did it in his case by suddenly bringing into view the two girlish figures he had so long been searching for.

Having mamma's new "cheeks-bottle" concealed in a non-committal box of white pasteboard, Sybil came forth, followed slowly by Dorothy, who had not completed her study of the coiffure worn by one of the waxy beauties with inch-long eyelashes and button-hole mouth, who lived in the window and turned about slowly and steadily all the time the public eye was upon her.

"Just wait, Sybil," said Dorothy, "until her back comes this way again. I'm sure that jug-handle [Pg 41] knot is not tied, and yet how can you make a knot of back hair stand up firmly like that without tying it, I should like to know?"

"Why," replied Sybil, "I believe it's done by extremely tight twisting. Haven't you noticed how a tightly twisted cord will double itself back in just that shape, and——"

She got no farther. A cough, "I beg your pardon!" interrupted her. Both girls turned, to face the smiling, bowing William Henry Bulkley, who, ignoring their frowns, hastened to say, with a sort of bluff and fatherly cordiality: "My dear Miss Lawton—Miss Dorothy—I hesitated to recall myself to your memory at our first meeting this morning, as I saw with regret you had quite forgotten me. [This is the sort of thing that keeps Truth at the bottom of her well.] But this second accidental meeting seems so like a Providence restoring a valued friendship that I venture to address you with messages to my old-time friend and neighbor, John Lawton!"

"Yes?" softly queried Dorothy, but Sybil, with back-thrown head, regarded him with an angry suspicion he could have shaken her for. Still he proceeded, blandly: "A man I highly esteemed, and have long hoped to meet again. You have, then [regretfully], quite forgotten me? You used to be rather fond of visiting my wife and swinging——"

"Oh, Mrs. Bulkley!" exclaimed Dorothy, catching Sybil's arm. "Don't you remember our fall from the swing, and how good she was to us?" And maliciously interrupted Sybil: "How angry Mr. Bulkley was? Yes, I remember you, sir!" [Pg 42]

And looking into each other's eyes, they hated one another right heartily. But Dorothy, thinking only of what a pleasant surprise this finding of an old friend would be to her father, hastened to say: "Papa will remember you well, Mr. Bulkley, I'm sure!"

"Thank you!" beamed that gentleman. "And your charming mamma, how is she? Well? So glad! A very lovely woman. May I ask your present address, and your kind permission to call upon your parents—that, according to our foreign critics, is, I believe, the correct formula, since they declare that parents are governed absolutely by their children in America. Woodsedge? Broadway? Ah, yes—yes, near the new park the city is about opening—quite so! I—I shall do myself the pleasure of driving out to present my compliments to your mamma and renew my friendship with your father. Do allow me, Miss Dorrie—no trouble at all. I am on my way uptown, and I shall esteem it a pleasure to see you young ladies on to your home train."

And almost forcibly removing various packages from both girls' hands, he constituted himself their escort and guardian, feasting his eyes upon the fresh young beauty of Dorothy when the noise prevented talking. At the station he added to their parcels a couple of magazines and a box of chocolates, and, seeing them safely through the door that admitted them to their train's platform, he doffed his hat in farewell. And Dorothy gave him a rather forced smile and hasty good-by, while Sybil, with unsmiling lips, gave a short nod of her haughty young head, and William Henry Bulkley said, low: "You damned little cat," put on his hat again and went out, and, climbing into a car, added to himself: "But the other one—good Lord! When you come to talk about peaches, why——" [Pg 43] [Pg 44]

CHAPTER V

"THE WOMAN OF FATE"

At the back of Woodsedge there was a place of green and fragrant mystery. In former years it had been an orchard, but unlimited sun and rain had combined, with man's neglect, to reduce it to this state of ruinous beauty. At one end the trees were so close, the boughs so intermingled, that their foliage seemed a canopy dense enough to turn aside the sharpest sun-lance, and the orchard, abutting, as it did, upon the forest growth belonging to the park, seemed but the more like a wilderness. For the girls it had many delights, the chief one being that the unscraped, uncleaned trunks, the unpruned branches, the weedy, seedy growths by the walls, all provided food in incalculable quantities for innumerable birds—long before fruit time. Your bird hates the well-cleaned, scraped-down, poison-washed, eggless, larvæless orchard of the commercially inclined farmer; but this seemed to be the general refectory for all the birds in the county. Baltimore orioles hung a nest from the tip of an elm bough directly over it. Orchard orioles, cat-birds, thrushes, and robins took apartments in it. A cuckoo and his wife dropped an inadequate and slovenly nest into an overgrown shrub, and though their slim, gray shapes were seldom seen, their "chug, chug, chug" was so often heard that Lena indignantly declared: "Dem rain crows cum make great lies in dis country. In de olt country, ven dey says 't-chug, t-chug,' ten it rain by jiminy! But here dey youst say 't-chug, t-chug' to make you worry mit de clothes dryin'," while the dainty antics of a jewel-like little redstart filled her with laughter. "I vork youst behind dat grapevine arbor, und I see him, my Miss Ladies; and he got von frau—youst so big as my tum, und so qwiet, und he make to dance und yump before her—und cock de eye at her, und he shiver out dem orange und black fedders for her to look at, und he svitch de leetle tail dis vay und dat vay, und she youst look up und say, plain, my Miss Ladies: 'Gott in himmel! Vas dere eber such a bird-mans as dis von of mine?'" And though the refectory was visited by warblers of many kinds, none of them made music sweeter than the innocent laughter of the sisters over the bird courtship Lena described. [Pg 45]

On this particular morning the girls had gone to the tangled old orchard for secret conclave. The ground was white with spring's snowstorm of fruit blossoms, and they could feel the petals falling

lightly upon their uncovered heads as they walked. Sybil pulled a monster dandelion, and, after touching the great golden disc with her lips, she drew the long stem through her dark hair, leaving the blossom blazing just above her ear.

"If this was only a rare growth," said she, "how people would rave over its beauty. Dorothy, take warning—don't be common! Always remember old gardener Jake's words to us when we were little: 'Make yerselves skeerce, young ladies, and y'ell be valley'd accordin'.' But what's the use of trying to teach wisdom to a girl who shows she's chock full of black superstitions!" [Pg 46]

For beyond a doubt Dorothy was earnestly searching for a four-leaf clover, and presently she held out a five-leaf specimen for Sybil to look at. But she waved it away, gloomily misquoting: "That clover doth protest too much, methinks. You will do better to cling to the three-leaf, that, promising nothing, has no power to disappoint you, Dorrie!"

"Oh, but I'm looking for the four-leaf for *you*, Sib dear! If I find it, you will get the introduction you long for without another such disappointment as yesterday."

"Oh, don't!" cried Sybil, leaning her brow against a tree trunk; "don't talk about it!" though that was exactly what they had come out there for—to talk over the failure of Sybil's last, best, most natural seeming plan for an accidental meeting with the woman of her dreams. She was busy winking back her tears when Dorothy gave an exclamation, thrust out her hand to brush aside a big, yellow-belted, booming bumble-bee, then plucked and held up triumphantly a four-leaf clover, and, her face all flushed with heat and excitement, she cried: "See that! She's yours, dear! The Woman of Fate—she's yours! Now you see if she isn't!"

Sybil took the little emblem of good luck, and, putting her arm around her sister's waist to hug her close, she laughed: "Oh, Dorrie, for a girl who says her prayers every night and morning, you are the most superstitious little beast—what's that?" [Pg 47]

"It's her!" answered Dorothy, in ungrammatical delight; and Sybil, catching some of her spirit, held the little emblem above her head, crying, laughingly: "Now let the poor leaf get in its fine work!"

The words were scarcely out of her lips when clear and sharp there rose the sound of metal's ringing blow against stone, followed by a quick "Ho—lá" in a woman's voice, and the instant stoppage of the regular "click-klack, click-klack" of a trotting horse.

Down under the gigantic willow—his favorite tree—had been sitting John Lawton, reading his paper, and now the girls saw him rise and hasten out to Broadway; saw him, with hat off, speaking to the fretful chestnut and his blue habited rider, who pointed backward with her crop. The watching girls, without hesitation, clambered over the low stone wall and came nearer. They made out that their father remonstrated, and the woman laughed. And then they caught from her the words: "Very kind, and in half an hour," and she was away again; but this time the "clipperty-clapperty-clip" told that she rode at a gallop. The girls fairly tore down the hill, crying "Papa—papa! what was it? Tell us about it!" But first he pointed to the disappearing pair, saying: "Look at that—that's not bad riding for a woman to do without a stirrup!"

"Without a stirrup?" questioned the girls. "Why, what do you mean, papa?"

"Just what I say. I told her it wasn't safe, but she says it's a poor horsewoman who can't ride from balance, and on she went; but she's—just wait a bit," he broke off, "I'll be back in a moment;" and he went down the road, crossed over to a large stone at the roadside, and, stooping, picked something up. Returning, the girls saw that he carried a woman's stirrup. [Pg 48]

"That's what we heard clear up in the orchard!" said Sybil.

"Is she going to send for it?" asked Dorothy.

Sybil's very breath was suspended as she waited for the answer. How slow he was about it! At last, feeling in his pocket for a bit of twine, he replied:

"No; she's going to stop here and pick it up on her way home."

Sybil went white for an instant, then flushed red from brow to chin. Dorothy squeezed her hand sympathetically. Mr. Lawton took up the stirrup and examined the leather straps critically.

"I'm going to try to tie this thing on when she comes back. She rides all right enough for looks without it, but if that horse should shy, and I don't believe he's a bit above it, for he's as nervous as a headachy woman, she might be unseated, so I'm going——"

The girls did not wait for him to finish, but hand in hand they made a rush for the house, and flew up the outraged and groaning old stairs, to bathe their flushed faces and to brush into propriety certain flying locks of hair, and, in old-time parlance, to "prink" themselves generally for the coming interview. As they hastened down again they were disappointed to see their father standing at the gate. [Pg 49]

"Oh!" cried Dorothy, "why did he not stay here and let her ride up to the porch for the stirrup. Then we could have appeared naturally and as a matter of course; now——"

"Now!" broke in Sybil, "as a matter of course we'll appear unnaturally, thrusting ourselves forward like ill-bred children! Oh, let's run down and bring papa back!"

And away they started, but almost immediately the "clipperty-clapperty-clip" of the approaching horse was heard, and they stopped. Dorothy, noting how swiftly the color came and went on her sister's cheek, said, piteously: "I wonder if—oh, I hope she will be nice, dear!"

"Nice?" repeated Sybil, savagely. "Why should she be nice? She is on the top wave of success—we're two little nobodies! Why nice, pray? But my pride is pushed well down in my pocket, Dorrie, and, if need be, I'll grovel for the help she alone can give me!"

She said no more, for the horse had already been pulled up, and with a laugh Miss Morrell held out her hand for the broken stirrup; but with almost incredible determination Mr. Lawton not only refused to give it up, but, leading the horse into the willow's dense shade, he produced an old awl and some twine, at sight of which the rider smilingly lifted her knee from the pommel and twisted about in the saddle, to give him a chance to find the broken strap—and the girls looked at her in amazement.

They had seen her often at the theatre—had wept themselves sick over her stage heart-break and death; but now they saw no faintest trace of that moving actress in the pleasant-faced woman [Pg 50] before them—a fair-complexioned, wholesome-looking woman, with lots of brown hair, that had glittering threads all through and through it that were accentuated by the blackness of the velvet derby-cap she wore. Her straight nose was a little too short, her cheek-bones a little too high, her mouth a little too wide; in fact, she had escaped being a beauty so easily that one could not help feeling she had never been in danger. All of which did not prevent her from being adored by women. Presently Mr. Lawton called: "Girls, come here and help me a moment! One of you keep this horse still and the other hold Miss Morrell's habit out of the way for me."

Dorothy, forgetting her timidity, ran to the big chestnut's head, so that her sister might take the place nearest to the rider; and as Sybil held the habit's folds out of her father's way, she raised such passionately pleading dark eyes that the actress, ever sensitive to human emotions, felt her heart give a quickened throb, and said to herself: "What on earth is it this girl is demanding of me?" Then she spoke: "I beg your pardon, sir, but if these are your young daughters, will you not introduce them to me?"

And John Lawton, who had the twine between his lips and the awl just piercing the strap, jerked his head to the right, and mumbled: "M—m—my oldest daughter, Sybil," then jerked it to the left, with: "M—m—my youngest daughter, Dorothy—Miss Morrell."

And pulling off her loose riding-glove, Miss Morrell gave her hand to each of the girls with a [Pg 51] close, warm pressure of the long, nervous fingers that was like the greeting of an old friend.

Dorothy chatted away, asking the name of the horse and making extravagant love to him. But what had happened to Sybil—the voluble, sometimes the sharp? She stood there dumb, and apparently unable to take her pleading eyes from the smiling face above her. At last the job was finished, and as Mr. Lawton placed the bronze-booted foot in the stirrup Miss Morrell's sigh of comfort and exclamation: "Ah, it does feel good to have it again, after all!" made that melancholy old gentleman laugh aloud from sheer self-satisfaction; and then, as she gathered up her reins, she gayly remarked: "Young ladies, since your father has introduced you by your first names only, perhaps you will now introduce him to me?"

And with much laughter they each took him by a hand and presented him in full name—"Mr. John W. Lawton."

Still feeling Sybil's glance, and being well used to adoring girls, Claire Morrell said, after thanking him for his kindness: "Mr. Lawton, I live just opposite, on Riverdale Avenue. If you go so far afield, will you not call upon me?" Then, touching the fading dandelion with her crop, she added: "I see you are fond of flowers. Perhaps your father will permit you and Miss Dorothy to come over some day and take a look at my posies?"

The color rushed over Sybil's face and her eyes fairly blazed in sudden joy, and the actress felt she had at least partly translated that beseeching gaze. Dorothy accepted the invitation very [Pg 52] prettily for herself and sister, Mr. Lawton raised his hat, and as the actress wheeled her horse about her white glove fell to the ground and she rode on, leaving it there. Dorothy snatched it up and passed it to Sybil, while John Lawton looked after the rider and remarked, with emphasis: "A charming woman!"

And Dorothy answered, excitedly: "I always thought actresses had to be pretty women, though at night even this Miss Morrell looks——"

"Never mind what she looks!" interrupted her father. "She's a charming woman! You must go over some day and see her at home!" And he returned to his paper under the willow.

Dorothy went at once to her mother to give that lady a voluminous and detailed account of what had happened, and to be cross-examined at great length as to the make of the actress's habit, the quality of her horse, and the condition of her complexion, greatly doubting, as she did, Dorothy's assertion as to its naturalness. But Sybil fled upstairs and flung herself across the bed and pressed her hot cheek against the crumpled rein-rubbed glove. Her wish had been granted, and all had happened so unexpectedly. Nervous, foolish, joyful tears ran down her cheeks, and, as she recalled the comprehending blue eyes of her Woman of Fate, she knew in her heart that she had found help. [Pg 53]

CHAPTER VI

A RECOGNITION AND A DINNER

It was Sunday. The inevitable May cold spell was over. Like half-perished insects, the Lawtons gathered on the porch and basked in the early sunshine. Presently John Lawton, who was sensitive to heat, particularly on Sundays, remarked that by the calendar it was May, but by his feelings it was late June. And Sybil dabbed at his forehead with her wisp of a handkerchief, and answered, with affectionate impertinence: "Well, it's not excessive originality of thought that wears you out, papa, for yesterday you made the dignified and impressive statement that the calendar said it was May, but your feelings told you it was November. No, don't apologize, dear," and she gave him an explosive kiss, "but put your little calendar idea away now for a while—say till fall, and it'll come out quite bright and useful."

Mrs. Lawton exclaimed: "Sybil!" then, in an excusing tone, "Ah! if we had our former surroundings I'm sure your manners and words would be quite in consonance with them!"

"No doubt of it!" promptly acquiesced Sybil, while Dorothy cried: "Papa, positively you ought to take strong measures with Syb, even though she is as tall as you are—you should shake her!" And [Pg 54] the utter absurdity of the suggestion sent them indoors in a gale of laughter that Mrs. Lawton denounced from behind the coffee urn as "absolutely heretical."

Instantly Sybil, with lance in rest, came charging at her mother: "Ho—ho! To the rescue! The English language is in danger! Mamma, had I so misused a word, you would have rapped me on the head with your thimble, *à la* governess Anna Smith, of evil memory."

Mrs. Lawton pushed up the quite dry bandage from her brows—that bandage was generally visible on Sunday mornings till after church bells ceased their troubling—and said: "'Pon my word, Sybil, your conduct sometimes approaches the contumacious! Dorothy, a smile may degenerate into a grin, and what amuses you is beyond my power of vision. I do know, however, that my English is unassailable."

"But," Dorothy tremulously ventured, "but, by heretical laughter, mamma, did you not mean instead that our noise was inappropriate, or——?"

"Miss!" broke in Letitia Lawton, "I meant what I said. It's Sunday, and it's heresy to laugh aloud on that day! Pass your father the cream-jug; I've lived with him in honorable wedlock for twenty years, but I can't sugar or cream his coffee right to this day."

"But, mamma," said Sybil, crunching a tiny radish, "is not heresy an unsound opinion——"

"Well, it's got to be an opinion opposed to Scripture!" and Mrs. Lawton hammered the words to the table with her knife-handle.

"Not necessarily," mildly objected John Lawton, as he pushed his cup toward the deity behind the [Pg 55] urn. "People have committed heresy against other things than the Scriptures. You can have an unsound opinion without its being a religious one."

"There! That's just what I said!" cried Mrs. Lawton. "Immoderate laughter on Sunday is ill-bred, and is, therefore, unsound religious conduct, which is worse than unsound opinion, which you, yourself declare to be heresy. Thank you, John, you seldom back me up so readily. Why! those girls have scarcely tasted breakfast, and there they go rushing upstairs. Oh, well, the walk is rather long to St. John's, and I suppose they wish to take their time over it!" And she settled down contentedly to her own dilly-dallying meal, while Mr. Lawton, with a very red face, silently drank his second cup of coffee.

After the girls had gone churchward, and Lena was in full control of the apartment, which Mrs. Lawton always referred to till three o'clock as the breakfast-room, and afterward as the dining-room, father and mother again resorted to the porch, each occupying one of its corners. Mrs. Lawton, who prided herself upon the propriety of her attitude toward the church, sat with the prayer-book open at the lesson for the day, feeling that the bandage on her brow so fully justified her absence from the church that she was exceptionally devout in thus following the service at the correct moment, and making her responses distinctly a few times, so that she might properly impress her dangerously lax husband. Then—well, the book seemed to be a long way off—the printed words ran together, jumped apart, whirled round about, a warm haze closed softly down [Pg 56] —she, she could not see. She slept, while over in the other corner Mr. Lawton sat by the Sunday paper that itself occupied an entire chair, and in its bulky entirety might well have required the ice-man's tongs to carry it up the hill. And in St. Johns, that church, picturesque and time-honored, that, gathering the little town about its knees, stands with it in the very centre of a hill-girdled hollow, and is in May already greenly veiled with tender ivy and young clambering rose, there sat none more devoutly attentive to the stately service than those two fair sisters from the old White house. Both were used to attracting more or less attention; therefore, when they rose for the Gospel, Sybil's "Glory be to Thee!" died away in her throat from sheer astonishment at the burning blush she saw sweeping over Dorothy's face from chin to down-bent brow. With swift, indignant eyes she searched for the cause of her sister's embarrassment, and no sooner had she found the guilty man, who stood at gaze, wrapped in what truly seemed unconscious admiration for that sweet face, than she gave a violent start of recognition; then, with sharp question in her eye, turned back to Dorothy, to find that blush even hotter, redder than it was before, and knew

instinctively that she, too, had recognized the grave young man of the city car—he who had frustrated Mr. Bulkley's plan; and with a sudden swelling of the throat the conviction came to her that these two had fallen in love at sight, and in a very passion of tenderness for her sister Sybil whispered to herself, "Dorrie! little Dorrie! what are you doing, dear? He looks brave and gentle, [Pg 57] and—and exacting, and—you dear little idiot, you are conscious of nothing but his gaze! And he, grave as he is, has quite lost track of any other presence here but Dorrie's—my little Dorrie, who is barely done with dolls!" And Sybil's dark eyes were dimmed with tears for a little time.

While they were sitting through the sermon, the dozing Letitia and John were being sorely confused and disturbed by the unexpected arrival of the oppressively opulent Mr. Bulkley. Poor Mrs. Lawton had been the last to awaken, and the glittering trap and big high-stepping sorrel with the wickedly rolling eye were coming up the unused grass-grown driveway before her eyes opened. She could not fly; she was fairly caught in bedroom slippers and bandaged head. There was but one thing to do, she decided, as John Lawton with drowsy eyes went forward to welcome his guest; she must hide her feet and play up to the bandage. In pursuance of this plan she instantly became very languid in manner and patiently enduring in expression; nor did she forget the bright bloom on her cheeks, but touching their cool surface with the back of her hand announced resignedly that she supposed her fever was coming on again.

And Mr. Bulkley frowned at the trees and talked malaria and quinine and thinning out; and finding the young ladies absent, decided to await their return. And so the evil moment came when Mr. Lawton had to confess himself unable to offer hospitality to the fretting sorrel, who was fidgeting and stamping and throwing gravel all over the place. And Mr. Bulkley had ordered his [Pg 58] man to take the horse back the road a bit to a stable attached to a road-house they had passed and put him up there; and as Letitia heard him add, "You can also get your dinner at the house, Dolan," her heart sank like lead before a vision of her almost empty pantry.

As the returning girls stepped aside to let the horse and trap pass out they heard Mr. Bulkley's big laugh from the porch, and in an instant two frightened blue eyes were staring into two troubled dark ones, while both girls exclaimed, in absolute terror: "Dinner!"

To those who have lived in the midst of plenty all their days, this dinner question may seem very amusing or very absurd, but the genteel poor understand it well. They know the humiliation and torture the sensitive hostess feels in trying to entertain the uninvited stranger within her gates; and here was this great, flaunting, high-feeding old man! There were people to whom the girls could have frankly offered bread and butter and tea, or crackers and cheese and a cup of coffee, but not to this "big animal," as Sybil called him. Dorothy laid her hand on her sister's arm and whispered: "Let us climb through the break in the wall and go up to the orchard and signal Lena to come to us, and there arrange what we are to do."

"Good idea, that!" agreed Sybil, "for you—er—I mean, we shall never be able to escape papa's ponderous friend after we once make our appearance upon the scene." So in the orchard the sorely troubled three held secret conclave. [Pg 59]

"Uf id vasn't Suntay!" Lena kept groaning, "or uf id vas breakfas' alretty instet of dinner, ven tings get chopped all up mit demselves so peoples don't know vat tings dey com' eat; but der dinner, Himmel! Und dat old mans, he eat—ach! I know he eat like dot great hop-up-on-to-mus at der park! Himmel!"

And Sybil threatened. "Dorrie! Dorrie! stop laughing this moment! Don't you dare grow hysterical! Lena, hold your tongue, and only answer direct questions. One chicken, you say? Only one? For five people? Dear heaven! But, Lena, has mamma her head bandaged up yet? Yes? Oh, joy! She need have no helping, then! She will be too sick, you see!"

"Nein! nein!" cried Lena, "der mistress lofes der dinner too mooch!"

"Yes, I know all that," sternly answered Sybil, "but she will restrain her appetite to-day for the reputation of her house! Dorrie, you *must* manage that mamma demands in her most plaintive tone some very thin toast and some tea, and she must shiver daintily at the merest suggestion of dinner. Promise her eggs for late supper, to comfort her."

Lena was for broiling their solitary chicken, but a cry of condemnation burst from Dorothy. "Broil it? Never! It must be eked out in some way. Lena, you can fry it—can't you? And make a great deal of cream sauce, and have some diamonds of toast around the edge of the dish to make it look full?"

"Ja!" nodded the willing Lena, "but dat young hens only make four goot pieces for all dat gravy [Pg 60] sauce; und you can't be sick too, my Miss Ladies!"

"Oh!" cried Sybil. "Listen, Dorrie, listen! Lena, was there not a bit of veal left from dinner yesterday?"

"Ja!" answered Lena, "but dat goes mit de oder scraps to be chopped for der breakfas'!"

"No, no!" interrupted Sybil, "put them on the platter with the chicken; cover them well with sauce and drop a tiny morsel of parsley on each piece to mark it; and we will coach papa, Dorrie, to help us to the parsley marked portions without letting the old dear know just why, and with a little care on our part no one need guess we are not eating chicken. That will leave the whole of it for the gentlemen, and Mr. Bulkley can have the second helping he will want, for you can cook a chicken à la Maryland as well as any aunty, Lena!" Then they agreed that neither one of them

would care for salad that day, but might freely indulge in coffee, though sharing very delicately in dessert. And so, patting Lena's sturdy shoulder in sign of their trust and gratitude, they picked up from the grass their shabby old prayer-books, and presently made demure appearance, coming slowly up the steep path that led to the weary, sagging, old porch.

And William Henry Bulkley, who for the last half hour had been calling himself every kind of a fool, ran his greedy old eyes over the tempting loveliness of Dorothy and changed his mind suddenly, feeling that the boredom caused by John and Letitia Lawton was not too high a price to [Pg 61] pay for the pleasure of loitering by the side of this wonderful girl. And so he made his devoirs in most expansive fashion; cast dust in Mr. Lawton's mild blue eyes by referring, in quite a fatherly tone, to his daughters as little Dorrie and Sybbie, was deferential in the extreme to Sybil, and confessed to a distinct recollection of every horse, every equipage, of Mrs. Lawton's ownership in the past, even to one or two she had owned only in her imagination. But never, she observed, did he for one moment lose sight of Dorothy.

At last Sybil, like a pitying angel, placed herself between Mr. Bulkley and her mother's slippers, and covered that lady's retreat to her own room to arrange herself for dinner. And it was Sybil who had sternly to replace the bandage and coach the hungry and irate mother in her part of delicate sufferer, closing the scene with the words: "I know, darling, you're too proud to allow anyone to guess at the straits we are in." Then, kissing the hungry tears from her mother's eyes, she added: "Just say to yourself, now and then, 'Eggs! eggs!' and that will keep your courage up—that and the knowledge that you are the only woman alive who can wear a handkerchief about her forehead and yet look pretty."

And Letitia simpered, and sprinkled a little bay-rum on her hair to suggest headache; ate a handful of crackers to take off the sharp edge of her keen appetite, and languidly descended to the distinctly musty parlor.

Dorothy had desired to go for a few wild flowers for the table, but she had not escaped from [Pg 62] William Henry Bulkley. In all the immaculate glory of his spring attire, as tightly trussed up as a large fowl ready for the oven, he walked at her side when the path permitted, and breathed stertorously behind her when it wouldn't. And when with a cry of joy she discovered that a twisted old hawthorn had actually hung out some garlands of snowy blossoms, he nearly had an apoplexy from his frantic efforts to obtain them for her. He loaded her with fulsome compliments, and he looked so strangely at her that the poor child hurried back to the house, vowing it was the last time she would go out with him, if he were papa's friend twenty times over; and passing him over to mamma in the parlor, she hastily arranged her handful of blossoms for the centre of the table, and captured her father and instructed him as to the serving of the chicken. As she spoke a trembling came upon his weak mouth, and his pained blue eyes looked away over her head. She put a pink-tipped forefinger on his lip and said, low: "Don't, papa, don't! It's all right, only dear, dear papa, you won't forget, will you now—for Syb and me the portions with the bits of green—you understand, papa?"

And he sighed and answered bitterly: "Yes, I understand! God knows I understand!"

At last, then, they sat at table. Sybil, holding her hatchet behind her in temporary amity, glowed and sparkled, cheerfully proclaimed her interest in the cult of delicate feeding, and boldly challenged judgment on the principal dish before them, the chicken *à la* Maryland, sorely [Pg 63] frightening her family by her reckless daring. But Mr. Bulkley, with Dorothy's wistful blue eyes upon him, without hesitation gallantly declared it could not be equalled this side of Mason and Dixon's line; and, to poor Lena's sorrow, proved his sincerity by accepting a second helping, which was hard on that help-maiden, who had not even eggs to look forward to later on.

But Mrs. Lawton's shiver of repulsion at the offered soup and her faint consent to the making of a little thin toast—"oh, very, *very* thin"—were so cleverly done that both girls mentally promised her a hug and a kiss by and by. And William Henry Bulkley, who lived solely for physical comfort and mental excitement, and was enjoying both at that moment, beamed and sympathized and complimented and ogled, and finally left the table swept so bare of food that the very locusts of Egypt might have gained points from the completeness of his ravages. And when with grateful hearts the Lawtons saw his red face smiling "good-by" from the gorgeous trap, as it went glittering down the drive, John went directly to his beloved willow, Letitia flew to the dining-room, but Sybil, dashing her fist upon the porch railing, cried, with white lips: "Oh, what a tawdry farce life has become for us! Dorothy Lawton, I go to Miss Morrell's to-morrow! If she helps me—good! If she does not, I'll kill myself! I swear I will! Oh, mamma—Lena! Come quick! Dorrie has fainted!" [Pg 64]

CHAPTER VII

A PRAYER AND A PROMISE

Next day, in spite of the faint her sister had frightened her into, Dorothy's cheeks and lips wore their usual clear, bright color, and it was Sybil's face that seemed drained of blood down to the edges of her scarlet lips, while faint violet shadows lay beneath her brooding dark eyes. True to the resolve formed the evening before, she prepared herself, early in the day, for a walk over to

Riverdale Avenue. She did not ask Dorothy to go with her, but when the latter noted the preparations being made, she cast down the paper she was dawdling over and herself made ready to go out, and Sybil put her arm about her sister's neck for a moment, in sign of gratitude for her companionship, and together they started forth to make the fateful call.

As they scrambled through the stony lane that made a short cut for them Dorothy said: "Did you pray to God to help you, Sybbie? I did."

"Oh!" recklessly replied Sybil. "I notice God generally helps those who help themselves!"

"You mean," corrected Dorothy, "who try to help themselves. All one can do by one's own self, Syb, is just to try. But God always keeps His promises, and will surely give help if you ask for it, *believing* in Him. And you do believe—you do, don't you dear?" [Pg 65]

Sybil shot a quick sidelong glance at her sister, hesitated a moment, then stopped, bent her head, and whispered, rapidly: "Lord! dear Lord! who seems always so far off, hear me, I pray! Soften this woman's heart toward me, incline her to help me, not because of any merit, but because of my great need. In your blessed Son's name I ask it. Amen!"

And then she hurried on ahead, while Dorothy, radiant with faith, scrabbled and slipped and laughed quite happily as they came out upon the wide, shady avenue, short of breath but sound of limb and skirt and shoe. As they passed the big gate and walked slowly up the driveway of The Beeches they saw a large red sunshade go bobbing around the corner of the house and halted.

"Shall we go on and ring the bell," asked Dorothy, "or shall we venture to follow her?"

"No! no!" answered Sybil. "The last refuge of the genteel beggar who comes to ask a favor is an absolute propriety of behavior—strict conformity to the demands of etiquette. To follow and join our hostess in her garden would be delightfully informal, but it would be too suggestive of familiarity. No! no! We must ring the bell and pass in a few ounces of pasteboard to the housemaid or the boy or——"

But just then there came a sound like a splash of something into water, a scream that trailed off into a gurgle of laughter, and finally clear and distinct the words: "You abominable little beast—poor angel! Hold still! You're wetting me all over, far worse than the lawn sprinkler!" And around the corner of the house came their hostess, her skirts wound well about her, while from her two outstretched hands dangled and kicked a muddy, dripping, coughing, spitting morsel of a skye-terrier. The three women gazed at one another a moment and then burst into laughter. [Pg 66]

"If you will rest a little on the veranda—there are seats there—I will join you the moment I am divorced from this small martyr to scientific research. No levity, please, Miss Dorothy." Then suddenly lifting her voice Miss Morrell cried: "Frida! Mary! M—a—r—y! Somebody come here, please!" and swiftly resumed her reproachfully explanatory tone, saying: "This animated bit of mud is, when washed and dried, a very earnest student of biology, or, to be more exact, of zoology, since she is most deeply interested in the structure and daily habits of the fugacious frog, which, up to this time, she has considered a terrestrial beast, inhabiting shady garden beds; but now she knows him to be amphibious; has proved it, indeed, by plunging after him into the muddy depths of the lily tub, just to see for herself, you know. There's devotion to study! Oh, Frida, here you are, at last! Take Mona and put her kindly but very firmly into her tub, no soap, you know, just a thorough rinsing—and then dry her as you would be dried, that is, tenderly. Miss Dorothy, I'm afraid you are what the old comedies call 'a frivol.'" And so with light banter they entered the house.

But Miss Morrell, being an observant person, saw from the first the preoccupation of Sybil, and to her the girl's pale face, cloudy hair, insistent dark eyes, and sullen red mouth, suggested a touch of tragedy, and again she asked herself: "What does she want? What is she demanding of me?" [Pg 67]

Dorothy, in answer to Sybil's look, was trying to find some excuse for leaving the two together, and had just expressed a desire to cross the lawn to look at a very fine hawthorn when they saw a young woman coming up the steps and heard a ring of the doorbell. Claire Morrell's eyes happened to be upon Sybil's at the moment, and the look of despair that settled whitely down upon her face made her think, with a quickening pulse, "That's just the expression of face many a woman must have seen reflected from the clear water a moment before the fatal plunge." And going swiftly forward to greet the new-comer, who was her neighbor, she decided to give Miss Lawton a chance to speak with her alone if she so desired. Therefore, directly introductions had been made, she asked Miss Helen Gray if she would not show Miss Dorothy about a bit, and, laughingly joining their hands, she shoo'd them before her, crying: "Go forth, lovers of flowers, and seek diligently for the oriole that hideth the nest in mine orchard! A prize awaits the fair, the chaste, the inexpressive she who first locates that nest!"

And as they went willingly forth Miss Morrell returned to the parlor, pushing to the door nearest the stairs, and remarked, casually: "We've got the whole floor to ourselves, now, so we may expand!"

Then, with a jerk and apropos of nothing, Sybil asked: "Miss Morrell, is it very difficult to get upon the stage?" [Pg 68]

A flash came from the blue eyes of the actress, and her lip curled contemptuously as she answered: "Oh, no! If a woman has been party to a particularly offensive scandal, or to a

shooting, or has come straight from the divorce court, then she turns quite naturally to the stage-door, which seems to open readily to her touch—such is the baneful power of notoriety. But your respectable, clean-minded girl, who wishes to enter a theatre of high standing, will find it easier to break through the wall, removing brick by brick, than to open unaided the door closed against her."

"Oh, don't!" cried Sybil, in a pained voice, "don't jest! I am in earnest! I—I—I want to go on the stage, Miss Morrell. Can you, will you, help me?"

"Certainly not!" came the swift answer. "Help to the stage a young girl who has a father and a mother and a good home? Be grateful for them, and——"

But her words were crossed by a shrill laugh and the bitter cry: "'A good home!' Dear God, hear her! 'A good home!'" And Sybil clasped her throat with both hands to choke back the strangling sobs that were following that laugh.

Claire Morrell rose, and, swiftly crossing to her guest, remarked: "You are not well." Then, quite ignoring the gasped: "Oh, yes, I am! I am well enough," she drew out the long pins securing it, lifted the heavy hat from Sybil's head, and, running her long fingers through the dark waves, said, gently: "What is it, child?" [Pg 69]

And Sybil threw her arms about the actress's waist, crying: "May I tell you? Will you listen?" A moment's pause; then, with a swiftly clouding face, she continued: "But, what's the use, you will not understand my trouble! If death had robbed me—if a lover had deserted me—any great disaster would touch your heart! But you, who are rich, successful, secure, cannot be expected to understand the shame, the humiliation, the suffering caused by mere poverty! And yet, it is genteel poverty that is crushing out the lives of all those who are dear to me! That is my trouble, but," she let her arms drop heavily away from the waist they had clasped, "you cannot understand!"

Claire Morrell stood tall in her soft amber gown, looking down into the troubled eyes lifted to her face. A half quizzical, half tender smile was on her lips. "You must not jump so hastily to your conclusions, Miss Lawton," she said. "I am very comfortable now, it is true. I have sufficient to eat, to wear, but I have known the time when I had neither." As Sybil's eyes widened, she went on: "You think you know poverty? Well, have you ever wandered about the city streets, clinging to the fingers of a mother who staggered with weakness, while she searched for work—for shelter? Have you felt the pinch of cold, the gnawing, the actual pangs of hunger? Once Death and I were kept apart by a single slice of bread. I think you may go on, my dear, for I have matriculated, and can well understand. Thank you, dear!" For Sybil had caught the speaker's hand, and, with quick sympathy, had pressed it to her lips. [Pg 70]

And as the actress sank down beside her, on the dark red cushions, Sybil poured forth all the story of her early luxury, her aimless education, their ever-deepening poverty, the isolation of her sister and herself, her mother's obstinate determination not to let them work, confessing even to her own dark thoughts and wicked threats, should this one hope be taken from her.

"For, you see," said she, "I can do nothing else—nothing, *nothing*! But I am young, I have intelligence, I have good common sense. I don't expect ever to be a crowned queen of the stage, but might not I be one of the little people that are required in so many plays? I think I might, for, oh, Miss Morrell, I do believe I could act!"

And noticing the swift play of expression on the vivid young face before her, that lady answered, quietly: "Yes, and I believe so, too."

Sybil clasped her hands, fairly gasping the words: "You will help me, then?"

"Wait? wait!" cried the other. "You are again jumping too quickly. I do not refuse entirely to consider your wishes; but, my dear girl, before I lift one finger, speak one word in your behalf, I must have the assurance that you are acting with the full approval, or at least with the consent, of your parents. No! No!" raising her hand imperatively, "don't coax, it would be useless, it would be unpardonable, dishonorable, to assist a daughter to enter a profession that her father and mother disapproved of."

Sybil leaned forward, and clutching a fold of the amber gown, asked, with dry lips: "And—and, if I win their consent? Oh, Miss Morrell, Miss Morrell, what then?" She trembled all over with excitement. [Pg 71]

The actress, looking back to the days of her own desperate struggle, felt a great pity for this poor child, who was so eager to rush, all unarmed, into the fray—a pity and a dread. "Child," she said, earnestly, almost piteously, "promise me that in the future you will never blame me for opening the stage-door to you. No matter what happens, promise to hold me in kindly, even forgiving memory, if need be!"

And Sybil said, fervently: "I shall worship you all your life and honor and revere you my own life through, if of your mercy you make me a bread-winner!"

"Had you come to me one week ago," continued Miss Morrell, "I could have given you a small position in my company for next season, but a young widow, who has never looked upon the footlights yet, came before you, and, well, she will undertake the small parts you might have experimented with. Don't look so hopeless! When your father and mother have consented to the

step we will go down to the city to do a little shopping, and we will just happen in at a certain theatre where I have often played, and I will present you to its manager, and will speak a little word for you, and *perhaps* he may give you the chance you long for. Child! child! Rise this moment! Kneel only to your God! Quick! Here are the others! Go over to that farthest mirror and put on your hat! Well, what luck?" as the girls came in, flushed and laughing. "What, you really found the nest?" [Pg 72]

"Yes," said Dorothy; "but you misled us. It was not in the orchard, but hanging from the tip of an elm-bough this side the orchard wall."

"And who won the prize?" smilingly inquired Miss Morrell.

"Miss Lawton did," said Miss Gray. "My neck soon grew tired, and I gave up staring upward."

"Then behold the reward of the patient searcher and the strong of neck!" And Miss Morrell handed Dorothy a silver souvenir spoon, bearing on the bowl an etched picture of The Beeches.

"Oh, how pretty!" exclaimed the recipient. "Sybil, see! Is this not charming?" And as her sister turned to look at the bit of silver Miss Morrell was positively amazed at the brilliant beauty of the girl's face when hope-illumined! As the Lawtons withdrew, Sybil, who passed out last, looked at her Woman of Fate with luminous worshipping eyes, and whispered: "God was very good when He created you!" [Pg 73]

CHAPTER VIII

"TELL HER YOU HAVE MY PERMISSION"

When the girls had returned from their call on the actress they were met at the door by a wildly excited, tearfully angry Lena: "Oh, my Miss Ladies!" she cried. "Vat you tink now? Vas I a mans I could say tarn! But I'm youst a vomans, so I cry mit my eyes! Dose mens of der gas houses com und dey make mit de bill und vant money right now dis minute down. Und I say der Herr Boss he's out, und der Frau Mistress comes in der bed mit der headaches, und de Miss Ladies go visitin' mit dat big actor lady's over yonter, und dey shall put de bill on der mantel-poard unter dat clock, dot doan't go no more! Und dot smarty mans, he gif big laughs, und say, 'Oh, no! dot plan's like de clock, it doan't go!' Und he say gif him right avay quick de pay for der gas! Und I say, Did he tink I carry de gas money in my clothes? Und den dey say dey cut off dot gas—cut it short off unless dey hav' de money. Und dey shov' me avay und go down in der cellar, und for sure, my Miss Ladies, I haven't seen dem mens cut nodings at all. But after dot dey take avay demselves. I youst go to light der dark entry vay out dere, and oh! oh! der gas don't light it, it don't even make no smells, und dose men did cut off dot gas, und carry it off mit 'em! Und we ain't got only vun candles in der house! And [sobbing loudly] uf anybody in der fam'ly should be took to die, all unexpec' like, it vill be in der dark to-night—you see, now!" [Pg 74]

Perhaps Sybil's courage might have required a little time to tighten it up to the sticking point, but this tale of Lena's was like a sharp goad pricking her forward. Throwing off her hat she said: "Lena, go make me a cup of coffee! Miss Dorothy will give you some change to buy a few candles for to-night." And as Lena trotted off to the kitchen Dorothy asked: "Shall you want me, Sybbie?" And as a shaken head was her only answer, she picked up her sister's hat and slowly turned away. At the stairs she looked back and said: "If you should want me, I'll be in our room waiting."

And the set, frowning face of Sybil softened for a moment, and she answered, gently: "Thank you, Dorrie! I know you will be wishing me success!"

And, satisfied with a kind word, Dorothy ascended to her own room, and presently heard the high shrill voice of her mother, crying out against "needless ignominy" and "degradation," caught the words "strollers, play-actors," "constables," "depths of vulgarity," "painted caricatures," and "serpent-tooth," and then suddenly the long wavering shriek and laugh of hysteria; and, knowing that Sybil needed help by that time, she softly entered the room and held her mother's beating hands, while Sybil administered soothing drops, applied a bit of plaster here and there to the self-inflicted scratches, and fastened a cologne-soaked handkerchief tightly about the doubtless aching head. But after the girls had placed her in bed she suddenly lifted her head and said, resentfully: "Miss Morrell might at least have called on me before talking things over seriously with you girls. I've been fifty times better off than she is! She may be a very great actress, but her social usages are all wrong, I can tell her that! And she can call on me, or you can keep off the stage all your life, Sybil Lawton!" [Pg 75]

And with violently restrained laughter the girls stole out of the room, leaving their mother to enjoy a nap.

"Oh," cried Dorothy, when they had locked themselves into their own room, "was not that mamma all over? Now it is Miss Morrell who is trying to induce you to go on the stage, and mamma will not consent unless she is called upon in state by the famous suppliant! Oh, it is funny!"

But Sybil's laugh was not hearty. She was thinking of her father, whose coming she waited

anxiously; and when at last they were out on the porch, alone in the sweet June dusk, she, leaning back against the railing, said, suddenly: "Dada!"

John Lawton started at the word. In an instant his memory presented him the picture of his handsome, vexed young wife as she fretted over the dark-eyed baby's persistent use of "dada" instead of papa; and his blue old eyes were very tender as they looked at the speaker expectantly.

"I went over to call upon Miss Morrell to-day."

"Did you?" he asked, in a pleased tone. "I'm sure you found her a charming companion?" [Pg 76]

"She?" exclaimed Sybil. "She is the best, she is the kindest woman in the whole world!"

"It's a habit with you, dear, to indulge in somewhat hasty conclusions. And you are a little extravagant, too, are you not? I have heard some very pretty stories of Miss Morrell's kindness to the people about here, but 'the whole world'?"

He smiled indulgently, and was going on to complete his remark, when, noticing the tightly clasped hands, the eager manner of his daughter, he paused, and, quick as a flash, she flung herself into the story of the day. Once only he moved, once only he spoke. When first she declared her intention of going on the stage he cried "Sybil!" then clasped his hand about his lips and chin and said no other word.

She was passionately portraying their hopeless, friendless state, when he turned restlessly in his chair, and murmured: "Why doesn't Lena light the gas—the house looks so dreary?"

"Why? why?" cried Sybil. "Why, because there is no gas to light. The bill was not paid to-day! Oh! see—see, dear! Something *must* be done! And I'm the only one to do it, you know that!"

Faintly a groaned "Oh, God! Oh, God!" came to her ear, and she cried: "Don't misunderstand! Oh, dada, don't! There was no reproach in that! I only mean I'm so well and strong I ought to help, at least, myself!"

"It's a hard life," he whispered.

"No harder for me than for other girls," she answered. [Pg 77]

"You might fail—you might, you know?"

"Even so," responded Sybil, "it would be more brave, more honorable to try and fail than not to try at all, but be content to cling like a parasitical growth to you and mamma, stealing from your vitality!"

He turned his pale face to her, and said: "There speaks my father, through your lips. The courage, the spirit, that passed by me reappears in you, a girl!" Again he turned away, and silence fell. She had reasoned, argued, entreated. Had it all been in vain? she asked herself. At last she faltered: "Dada, are you going to refuse your consent? Shall you forbid me?"

He turned upon her in a white passion of misery: "Refuse you? Forbid you? What right have I to forbid anything? Fathers who bring honor to the family name, who support, shelter, and protect their children, have earned the right to guide them—to forbid them for their good! But what right have I? My father gave me a fortune—I was too weak to hold it! God gave me daughters, and I am too weak to protect them!" His head fell upon his breast, he extended his trembling old hands to her, and abjectly murmured: "Pardon me, my daughter! pardon me!"

In an instant his shamed old face was resting above the high-beating young heart of his child. She smoothed back the silvery hair from his lined brow, and said, imperatively: "Dada, answer me this one question, and we will have done. Answer truly! Do you believe there is a father, great, strong, rich, influential, in this city to-night who is more truly, reverently loved than you are? Tell me!" [Pg 78]

And the old man answered: "No! no! Though I have lost everything else in the world, my children's love remains to me. That is the one sweet drop left in the bottom of the cup! It is compensation, daughter, it is compensation!"

Sybil rested her cheek upon his head, and crooned over him as though he were a sick child, until the young summer night lifted her mighty silver shield high above the grewsome black trees, then a peevish voice from above called: "Sybil! John! What are you mooning over down there? Why on earth don't you come in out of the damp? The quinine bottle's more than half empty now! No one ever seems to consider ways and means in this house unless I do! And John, this room's full of all sorts of flopping, flying things! They've put the candle out twice, and you ought to come up here and try and chase 'em away! Besides, I—I don't want you two down there, anyway!"

John answered, obediently, "Yes, Letitia!" But Sybil laughed a short laugh, and said: "The wasp carries his sting in his tail, and the pith of mamma's remarks are generally found at their end. No, she doesn't want us two down here anyway! Papa, I knew mamma was jealous of me when I was only as high as your knee, and——"

But her father put his finger on her lip, saying: "Don't, daughter; it is not a gracious thing to speak of a mother's faults."

And Sybil said, hastily: "I beg your pardon, papa!" Then, as they rose, she put her hands on his shoulders and asked, very prettily: "Papa, will you not in so many words give me your permission [Pg 79]

to try for a position on the stage? Miss Morrell will not move an inch without it."

"She is a good woman, an honest woman!" he said. Then he put his hand under Sybil's chin and, lifting her face to the moonlight, looked steadily at her a long moment, sighed heavily, and answered: "Since you are so determined, dear, yes, you may tell Miss Morrell you are acting with my permission in seeking to enter her profession." And he put her quickly from him and went slowly into the house, stumbling up the stairs in the darkness.

And Sybil lifted her arms above her head, stretching her hands up toward the moon in a very ecstasy of joy. "Oh," she whispered, "*am* I to escape from this 'slough of despond'—*am* I to have my chance in life? Perhaps I may become successful, happy?"

And right across her smiling, upturned face a hideous creature of the night flew so low, so near, one leathery wing touched her loosened hair. She flung her hands across her face with a startled cry, then laughed a little tremulously, saying: "B-r-r-r! a bat—ugh! How I loathe them! I—I think I'll go in" and she entered the house, closing and with some difficulty locking the door in the darkness.

As she reached the top step of the stairs a door opened, and Mrs. Lawton in her undress uniform of mind as well as body, a guttering candle held high above her head, stood enframed in the doorway—Mrs. Lawton in night-dress and knitted bedroom slippers, but without her upper teeth, without her thick switch of hair, without her rosy bloom of rouge vinaigre; and without all these [Pg 80] things it was surprising how little there seemed to be left of the every-day familiar Letitia Lawton. Looking at the small, sleek head; the pallid, sunken face; the flattened figure—Sybil thought, rather wickedly: "This is a sort of skeleton mamma. I wonder if papa would like to put her in the closet?"

But the lady was addressing her querulously: "Oh, you have decided it to be worth while to follow a mother's suggestion, and come into the house at last? In former days I could have called in a doctor for every chill in the family, even for the servants—though, to tell the truth, servants rarely have real hearty chills; indeed, I doubt their ability to contract genuine malaria. It's a mere desire to imitate their employers. But now that your poor father has lost everything—that is, everything except his good name [with a stinging look at Sybil, which, that young person understood perfectly]—I can only defend the health of my family with the quinine bottle, and I do think you and your father might have held your secret consultation inside the house. I'm sure neither Dorothy nor I would have tried to pry!"

"Oh, mamma!" indignantly exclaimed Sybil, "you know what I was asking of papa!"

"I know!" broke in Mrs. Lawton, "that you were twisting him about your little finger, as you usually do. It is not for a father to decide a girl's destiny, without even asking the mother's advice. You two have connived together, I believe, with that Morrell woman, who has not even [Pg 81] called upon the mother she would rob! But remember this—the house that is divided against itself goes to the wall, or—er falls, or something; and how you can stand and laugh at the mother that bore you is more than I can understand! Your Grandmother Bassett never received such treatment from me—I know that! But you and your father may think everything is safely settled, and you as good as on the stage; but let me tell you I am not quite helpless in this matter. There is still one link between me and the life of ease and luxury and beauty I once knew! You seem to forget you have a god-mother—though how you can forget the only human being who has been able to give you presents for ten long years, I don't know! But you have a god-mother, and Sybil Van Camp has at least enough of her fortune left to merit our respect! Oh, you need not pout! Down you go to-morrow to Mrs. Van Camp, and if she sees no shame in spreading the name of Lawton all over New York, well and good! She was a power in her day. I nearly fainted from joy and pride when she consented to stand god-mother to you! You don't like to trouble her—very private matter? I wish it was a private matter. As for trouble, didn't she vow in church to become your surety and see that you renounced things and—ah, well, what's a god-mother for if she don't take some responsibility? Anyway, you go on to no stage without Mrs. Van Camp's consent, nor without proper social amenities being extended to your mother!

"And Sybil, I simply *can't* be kept standing here all night in my state of health! Of course, dear, I [Pg 82] am interested in all your plans, but it would have been more thoughtful had you waited till morning to talk them over. But that's where you take after your poor father in a certain unpremeditated selfishness—unpremeditated, I admit, for he's a gentleman and you've had the upbringing of a lady—though you are deprived of the surroundings of one, but through no fault of yours or mine! John!"—turning sharply to peer into the darkness behind her—"what are you groaning about, I'd like to know? It's my legs and back that are bearing the fatigue of this interview. I saw you took good care to loll comfortably through your talk with Sybil. So why you should groan now, I don't know, unless you've hit your bunion on the frame of the sewing-machine again, and you generally swear a little when you do that. Sybil, I'm fairly worn out in mind as well as body, and you tore your veil the other day, didn't you? Cheap lace always goes that way. There was a time when my veils made people turn around to look at them. I had one with a border of grapes and vines, I remember; I am always an honest woman, and as the border had the effect of cutting off one's chin, I can't pretend it was becoming—but, my dear, it cost thirty dollars, as I'm a living woman! But you can wear my net veil to-morrow, and you will have to take Dorothy with you, for I shall be utterly used up and unable to chaperon you; though once they get you upon the stage, I suppose you'll go prancing about without attendance of any sort. But until that time, you will show some respect to social conventions. Good-night, Sybil! Take a [Pg 83] quinine pill before you go to bed. You have advanced me well upon my way to the grave this day.

But I can't forget you are my child, and if you should get a chill, you couldn't go down to Mrs. Van Camp, who will probably put an estoppel upon these theatre plans of yours. Yes, yes! John! I'm coming! It does seem that I might be allowed to speak a few words of advice and caution to my own daughter without interruption every moment or two!"

And profiting by the momentary diversion, Sybil flew past her mother to the room she shared with her sister. Dorothy had placed the candle high on a small bracket that held their shabby little hymnals and prayer-books, and as Sybil entered she saw directly before her the young girl on her knees at the bedside praying. The light fell upon her uplifted, happy face, making a faint aureole in the bright hair that at the back fell in a long queue. A tenderness came into Sybil's eyes, but as they fell upon the upturned soles of Dorrie's feet from beneath the night-dress, rising mischief triumphed. She looked at the pink round heels, at the whiteness of the hollows, and then the pinkness again across the balls of the little trotters; and, resisting not a moment, stooped and drawing her finger zig-zag across them both, produced a wild lash out, a startled: "Oh! ouch!—for ever and ever—Amen! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Syb!"

And before Dick could pull his head out from beneath his wing and set it in the right direction, the bed was pillowless; those useful articles serving as ammunition in the battle royal raging [Pg 84] gloriously between the dressed and the undressed, while happily neither one guessed they were bidding farewell to childish romps in this, their last great pillow fight.

And across the hall the subdued John bowed in silence, and allowed the conquering Letitia to place her foot a little more firmly upon his neck. The light had gone out, 'tis true; yet, as the victorious one could talk on perfectly well in the dark, it was nothing short of a merciful dispensation that permitted meek and conquered John, under cover of the darkness, to sleep—sleep quietly, almost attentively, thus escaping actual madness. For as constant dropping weareth away a stone, so constant talking weareth away the listener's brain! [Pg 85]

CHAPTER IX

THE ACCIDENT—A FRIEND IN NEED

Early the next morning the girls prepared for their ride cityward, for, though their sharp young eyes saw Mrs. Lawton's follies and her faults; though they writhed under her despairing lamentations and blushed at her outrageous boastings—perhaps because they were guiltily conscious of sitting in judgment upon their mother—they yielded her prompt obedience whenever she gave a command.

Mr. Lawton elected to walk with them to the station, and Lena, on her way upstairs to the "frau mistress," bearing on a tray a breakfast of simple material but of amazing size, nodded and smiled, and with unconscious impertinence commented upon their looks, declaring with hearty admiration that they were "youst lofely right away down to der ground!"

Dorothy laughed and said, "Take good care of mamma, Lena!"

And that handmaiden glanced down at the stack of buttered toast and the eggs and young home-raised onions, and made answer with a droll not to say sly look in her light blue eye: "Oh, ja! I make goot care mit her, my Miss Ladies—und ven she eat all dese breakfas', she'll be all right, uf she don't be vorse!" And away she went up the groaning stairs with the odor of coffee trailing [Pg 86] behind her.

When the three had reached the little station that like a hen covering her brood nestles low at the very foot of the hill, with the glistening metal rails passing on one side and the glittering, dimpling, rippling river flowing by on the other, John Lawton lifted his hat and kissed his daughters good-by with the careful courtesy habitual with him, and holding Sybil's hand a moment he said: "I—I shall walk over to The Beeches to-day, dear——"

"Papa!" exclaimed the girl.

"Yes," he went on; "I shall make my acknowledgments to Miss Morrell. You think she did a fine thing when she sympathized with and promised to help you, but she did a finer thing when she refused to ignore the parents—the old people, who are generally pushed to the wall in such cases. I shall thank her for her consideration, and——" but the roar of the approaching train sent the girls scurrying through the little waiting-room out to the platform and into the car. A pair of kisses were waved, and they had lost sight of the tall, slender, old gentleman.

And Sybil, as she sank into the seat beside Dorothy, exclaimed: "Is he not a dear? Is it not wonderful that this sordid poverty has not made him selfish, narrow-minded, sullen? Poor papa! Do you know, Dorrie, I'm afraid he suffers more than we imagine!"

"Oh!" cried Dorothy, "don't say that! I always thought papa was almost contented with things, except on our birthdays! But now we must love him more than ever, Sybbie!" [Pg 87]

And to drive away the anxious look from her sister's eyes, Sybil called attention to the odd appearance of the car, which was almost filled with gentlemen, and remarked, laughingly: "We have taken what mamma calls 'the busy man's train.' They are a sociable lot, are they not—every

man-jack of them with his nose in his paper, and a nice little wrinkle between his puckered brows?"

"That's from trying to get and keep the proper focus," laughed Dorrie, who added: "I've a five-cent nickel in my pocketbook, and I'll give it to you, Syb, if you can learn the color of a single pair of eyes in this car—barring mine, of course."

"Well, the nickel must be plugged or you wouldn't have it, so I'm not losing much; but, oh! after all, I may win it—plug and all! One male creature has eyes, for he has lifted them, and they are—are! Pass over the nickel, Miss, they are gray with black lashes, and—*oh*!"

She stopped in confusion, for the male creature she was watching had lowered his paper a moment, and she recognized the grave young man; and to herself she ruefully remarked: "And the third time's the charm!"

And though Dorothy busied herself in finding the despised nickel, her swiftly deepening color told her sister that she, too, had recognized their fellow-traveller whose calm features showed no trace of the surprised delight he felt at again seeing the face of the "violet-girl," as he termed her [Pg 88] in his thoughts. He only gave a severe, scrutinizing glance at the shade of his window, carefully lowered it about an inch, and then returned to his paper, reading over and over and over again how a certain Mr. Somebody had become the benefactor of his race through selling shoes to men for three dollars a pair. Yet, in spite of his steady reading, he kept saying to himself how strange it was that the fair-faced Violet-Girl should cross his path on this the red-letter day of his life—the setting of whose sun would leave him so much better off financially than it had found him in the morning. And he could not help thinking how much sweeter his good fortune would seem if there was someone to share it with him.

If his mother had not left him, what soft, silky, flowery pillows and spreads her couch should have; what rich, dull rugs! But the almost surreptitious care bestowed upon her grave was all that he could give her now. Yet he could imagine how those appealing eyes over there would widen with surprise and dance with pleasure if one she cared for brought a story of endeavor crowned with success. He wondered what her name was. He knew her family name, for he had heard someone at the church corner, on Sunday, refer to them as "those Lawton girls," and had winced at both tone and words.

And the Lawton girls, meantime, were discussing the probable result of their visit to Mrs. Van Camp.

"I'm afraid the chances are against you," said Dorothy, anxiously. "You know how she goes on [Pg 89] about family. 'Old families and the proprieties' are words of sweetness to her, though she is as gay as a girl and as droll as a Merry Andrew—on occasions. 'The stage'—only two words—but when spoken in relation to Mrs. Van Camp's god-daughter, Sybbie, I'm afraid you can't manage her."

"She won't need managing, Dorrie. She's mercenary to the point of worshipping Mammon, but, thank heaven, she never meanders as mamma does, who wanders away from the subject into tortuous and serpentine courses. No manœuvring will be required with God-mother Sybil. I shall marshal my facts, dwell upon the honor of being introduced by Miss Morrell into the profession—she has professed the greatest admiration for her all her life—and, as she knows already our unspeakably helpless condition, I'm sure she will come to a quick decision. Oh, mercy! They are already lighting the gas. How I do detest the tunnel! I always come out so sticky and prickly about my face and neck—and grimy, too!"

"Oh," answered Dorothy, "I wouldn't object to being sticky and grimy, if only I were not afraid. But, Syb, I can't help it; I never have passed through this tunnel yet without taking part in an imaginary accident."

"You should follow the example of your religious friend, Mr. Walton," laughed Sybil, "who declares he always fills in the time by praying."

"Yes, and I think he should be ashamed of himself!" indignantly interrupted Dorothy. "It's nothing [Pg 90] short of an insult to his Maker to pass through the beautiful green fields and the warm, sunny air reading a newspaper; and, when entering a foul, ill-smelling, black hole of man's creating, to begin praying because he can't do anything else!"

Under cover of the roar of the train Sybil laughed aloud, delighted to have got a rise, as the slang phrase is, out of Dorrie's mild temper.

The men, looking waxy pale under the light of the overhead lamps, were folding up papers, settling hats afresh and preparing for the famous American rush from the train when Sybil, noticing that her sister's eyes were closed, exclaimed, with malicious triumph: "I believe you are praying yourself! You are, at this very moment!"

"Well," smiled Dorothy, "you see, you don't know how frightened I am, and anyway I don't reserve my prayers for an otherwise useless moment. I prayed this morning, with my eyes open, looking right into God's rising sun!"

Crash! *Recoil!* CRASH! And a swift, appalling darkness, cut across by one woman's piercing scream! Running footsteps! The venomous hissing of escaping steam; the stench of gas; and then in that Stygian darkness, rising clear above the undertone of groans and short-breathed oaths,

was a girl's voice crying: "Dorrie! Dorrie! Oh, Dorrie!"

Noises outside were growing louder, and Sybil scrambled up from the floor, where she had fallen, and, mad with terror, stretched out groping hands in the direction she had last seen Dorothy, and oh! blessed God! encountered two little hands, that closed on hers. The next moment she had her [Pg 91] utterly silent sister in her arms, and impatiently shook away something warm that kept creeping, creeping down her temple and her cheek. The din outside was awful, the darkness an anguish! Suddenly there was a flare of a match—it went out! A groping, searching hand struck Sybil's shoulder. Another match, a wax one, was lighted, and the young man she had jested about, hatless and very pale, asked, swiftly: "Is she hurt? I hope she has not fainted?"

He leaned closer, and Dorothy's great, strained blue eyes stared up at him from her sister's breast.

"Can't you speak, dear?" pleaded Sybil. "Oh, she is half killed with fright!" she added, turning to the stranger, and again the creeping thing was on her cheek, and Dorothy cried, sharply: "Blood! blood! Oh! Sybbie's hurt! Can't you help her?" And the match was out, and they were again in that hell of darkness and steam and gas and roar! But a calm and friendly voice came to them, saying: "Stay here; take part of these matches and light one now and then while I get out and find what can be done! Oh, here come the torches! Now we'll soon have help!" But before he left them he drew from a pocket a handkerchief, folded it, and swiftly tied it about Sybil's head, and even then the girl smiled at his naïve, lover-like excuse: "The blood frightens her so!" And through a few agonized minutes the girls clung tightly together, shivering in a very ague of terror. And then, through the billows of steam, the low-hanging, strangling clouds of smoke, they saw men [Pg 92] with lanterns, heard orders, short and sharp, then their friend was lifting them down from the high, high step; and Sybil, with her arms about Dorothy, was aided, led, pushed, or pulled along at the will of the only person who noticed their presence or existence.

There had been much noise—noise of voices, of metal ringing on metal, of hurrying feet—but suddenly it ceased. A moment's quiet came into that place of mad excitement. The crowd before them drew apart. Like lightning, their guide threw himself in front of the girls, whispering: "Don't look! Don't let her look!" And Sybil, with chilling blood, recalled that one piercing cry, that woman's cry, and to save her soul could not help sending a glance toward the four men who bore upon a stretcher a hastily covered form, so still, so pathetically slight! Covered? Yes, but one little foot in oxford-tie was exposed. A foot so like—so like— And Sybil caught Dorothy in an embrace fierce enough to wring a cry from her, and the words: "What is it, dear? Are you hurt again? Have you turned your ankle, or— Oh, Sybbie! It was that poor man! Oh, can't we get out? *Can't we?*" and her voice broke into frightened sobs.

The other two exchanged meaning glances, for, as this outburst had been caused by the sight of two stalwart blue-coated men, who, after the manner of children "making a chair" were carrying on their crossed arms a passenger whose leg was broken, they trembled at the thought of the collapse that must surely have followed upon the sight of that frail, broken thing, whose mute [Pg 93] authority had yet the power to silence the awful din.

How they escaped from the stifling, sloppy, grimy place of torment they could not have told, had the saving of an immortal soul depended upon such telling. There was a ladder, and a failure, and a carrying of the ladder to another place by the aid of a trainman, who roared some advice as he stole a few moments for their service. Then coaxings for Dorrie, sharp directions for Sybil, and—and somehow they were standing in a street, dazzled by the sunlight, sick and faint and dirty and drabbled, but out in the pure air once more. And knowing that Dorothy's life might have gone out from sheer terror but for the aid and encouragement of the grave young man, Sybil held out both hands to him, crying: "I thank you from my heart, and I will serve you at command, for Dorrie's sake, who—who——"

Her lips whitened—trembled. She clutched blindly at his arm for support. Her self-control had been wonderful, but, like everything else, it had to be paid for. The shock to her nerves had been terrible, her wound had bled profusely, and when a strong arm about her waist lifted her over the threshold into a quiet pharmacy she was just barely conscious and no more.

The bald-headed little proprietor closed his doors upon the gaping crowd, and, while reviving Sybil and dressing the really ugly cut her head had received from striking against the frame of a seat, when she had fallen to the floor, he called upon his wife to descend from her room above, and she, with ready sympathy, brushed and pinned up Dorothy's raiment and sponged away the [Pg 94] smears and smuts from her face. And when the cheerful little woman turned for a moment to the young man, to tell him she could bring him her husband's second hat, if he did not mind its being a bit burned by the suns of last summer, he overheard poor Dorothy saying: "Whatever shall we do, Sybbie? We bought return tickets, and—and we only have left ten cents, that was to have paid our street-car fare to god-mother's."

A swift "S-h-h!" from Sybil silenced her. The man's heart contracted with a pang of pity for their distressful situation. The next moment he stood before them, and, addressing the elder, said: "Miss Lawton, I am going to ask permission to introduce myself to you, as there is no one to perform the service for me. I am a sort of neighbor of your family, since I, too, am summering at Yonkers. My name is Galt—Leslie Galt—and in consequence of this accident I ask you to trust yourself and your sister to my care, until I can leave you at your own front door—will you?" He waited for no answer, but continued: "I will have a carriage here almost directly, and we will board a Harlem train, get off at Mount Vernon, and then drive to your house."

Sybil's spirits began to rise. "Don't you think," she asked, glancing at their sooty, oily, dirty white gowns, "we should be sent to the steam laundry before that?"

"No," he gravely replied, though his eye gleamed; "not before, but after, by all means." [Pg 95]

"But," Dorothy began, anxiously, "do you suppose mamma and——?"

"I am going to send them word," broke in Galt, "that you are quite safe before I get the carriage. You are safe, you know, physically, mentally, morally. Only your wardrobe's ruin is complete." And gayly donning the proprietor's ancient hat he hurried away, in their service.

And so it happened that the reassuring telegram had not yet reached the old White house, though a rumor of an accident in the tunnel had, when a shabby old hack came rattling up the grass-grown drive and stopped before the sagging porch, where Letitia, ghastly under all her rouge, stood clinging to John Lawton, who trembled visibly all his length. And when a strange man got out he closed his eyes a moment, and passed his tongue over his dry under lip.

Then, as thrilling sweet as had been their faint birth-cries, there came to his ears two joyous "Papas! Mammas!" And then ensued a very whirlwind of embraces, of kisses, of cries, of exclamations! And when Sybil had said: "Mr. Galt saved us and brought us back to you, papa!" the old man held out his hands and grasped those of the young man. His kindly, frightened blue eyes gazed and gazed. His piteous old mouth trembled and formed words that would not be said. And like a flash Leslie Galt saw again Dorothy's wide blue eyes and fright-stricken mouth, as she lay upon her sister's breast, beneath the flare of the waxen taper. And, recognizing the likeness between father and daughter, he opened his heart to the helpless old gentleman then and there. [Pg 96] Though John Lawton never got his thanks into words, his silent gratitude made a deeper impression than did the bursting dam of Letitia's eloquence. And Lena, rushing upon the scene to inquire as to the welfare of her Miss Ladies, started out joyously with: "Ach! You com' all right again? Eh? You com' back mit all your arms und legs und feet, und—und [a look of horror growing on her face] mein Gott! mein Gott! Get avay, quick, und put yourselves by der vash-tubs!" an ending which sent everyone into laughter.

And as the girls were swept away by their mother, one blue flash met a waiting pair of gray eyes; and as John Lawton walked down to the gate with Leslie Galt, who had asked for and obtained leave from Mrs. Lawton to make a call of inquiry next day as to the young ladies' healths, they paused a moment, and Lawton, holding his new friend's hand tightly, waved his left, indicating all the forlorn and neglected old place in one gesture, and said: "You see, our daughters are all we have left on earth—all, all! And you——"

He gently drew his hand away, lifted his hat punctiliously, and, turning, walked slowly back to the decaying old White house! [Pg 97]

CHAPTER X

CALLING ON THE MANAGER

It was the last week of the season at the Globe Theatre, and it was closing in a blaze of glory. To leave a good taste in the mouth of the public, the actor-manager, Stewart Thrall, had given it a final week of Shakspere. "Romeo and Juliet" was playing with a very good and beautiful young woman as star, who could not quite hide her contemptuous misunderstanding of the passion-shaken little maid of Verona, the swiftness of whose love is ever matched by its purity; and who, therefore, seized upon the potion scene, making much of it and of the final scene of all, so that it was not an ideal Juliet, but a most beautiful woman in a rich and picturesque setting, who, brilliantly successful in other characters, was accepted readily in this, because, forsooth, nothing is so successful as success.

A large and beefy but an emphatic Romeo, who had to enthuse for two, an exquisite Mercutio, a deliriously droll Nurse, and an excellent general cast by their united efforts gave this very pleasing performance, whose seven repetitions would do much to dim the memory of the many French abominations that earlier in the season had freely scattered wink, innuendo, and double-entendre while trailing their chic indecencies about the same stage. Of course a few real lovers [Pg 98] and students of Shakspere felt the pity of the marred, misunderstood characters, while keenly enjoying other more poetic presentations; but Stewart Thrall was appealing to another class, the great uncultivated, who, though secretly bored to extinction, dearly loved to pose (for one week only) as patrons of the Bard; and as they exchanged platitudes with one another, when meeting by chance at the box-office window, they invariably congratulated themselves upon having one manager in their midst who dared to produce Shakspere.

And some declared, with enthusiasm, that he deserved a public vote of thanks for thus giving their sons and daughters an opportunity to study a Shaksperian drama. And Mr. Thrall, sitting in the box-office out of sight, but not out of hearing, smiled sardonically, and signed a cable order to his Paris agent to secure a great Frenchman's newest, wittiest indecency for New York's future delight, knowing well that the Shaksperian poseurs outside would be found among its most generous patrons.

Then, glancing at the treasurer, busy over his floor-plans, change-drawer, and ticket stamps, he said: "By the way, Barney, you reserved the wrong box for Claire Morrell last night. I told you plainly the right box—didn't you understand me so?"

"Yes, sir," replied that young man of amazing collars, throwing back his head and tilting up his cruelly scraped jaw in an effort to escape the strangle-hold of the white linen long enough to answer his employer's question. "Yes, sir; but—but you remember you were standing on the stage [Pg 99] when you called out to me to hold the right-hand box, and I thought you meant the box to your right as you stood, and that, of course, is the left box on the seat chart; and so I reserved that, and——"

"And spoiled the evening for Miss Morrell, who, for some reason, will never occupy a seat on the left of the house if she can help it."

"Well, sir, I thought——" writhed and twisted he of the collar.

"Don't think, then, Barney. I'll do the thinking if you'll do the obeying. Next time ask—that's easier than thinking, or [with a laugh] it would be to anyone else. Barney, that infernal collar will cut your head off one of these days. Why don't you have it lowered a couple of inches and enjoy some of the comforts of life?" And, striking a match, he lifted it toward his cigar, stopped suddenly, shook out the small flame, put the cigar back into the box on the shelf, and turning to Barney said: "I'll take your place five minutes. I want you to run as quickly as you can round to the confectioner's and get me some sugared violets. Hurry, now, that's a good fellow!"

And Barney, snatching his hat from the nail, made a dash for the street, wondering as he ran "who was coming to see the governor, for, of course, he wasn't going to squat down there alone and stuff himself with violets." By which anyone can see what a coarse-minded young person this seller of tickets was.

But he was swift of foot, and was soon back in his place at the office window, while, dainty [Pg 100] package in hand, his employer came out, crossed the vestibule, and, entering his private office, proceeded to untie his parcel and pour the fragrant, crystallized violets into a charming bonbonnière standing on the corner of his desk.

The prevailing tone of this room was a dull, rich red, and it made an agreeable background for the figure of the man standing there, Stewart Thrall, the actor-manager of the Globe Theatre, who was at that moment expecting a call from the popular actress, Claire Morrell, and a certain young lady who wished (oh, foolish young lady!) to go upon the stage. A tall man, of excellent figure. He was a well-groomed, clean-skinned man. There was nothing of the long-haired, floating necktied, fur-coated, comic-journal actor about him. He was no "beauty man," either; but, as a certain very great lady had once truly said, "He had eyes and a manner."

A charming manner it was—gracious, graceful, sincere. And as one takes a certain simple base for a sauce, and, by adding various flavors or acids, produces innumerable different sauces, so to that natural manner he, by adding a touch of dignity or sternness or jollity or deprecation, came very near making himself all things to all men. His closely cropped hair was black—not the blue-black of the Latins, but that darkest brown that is America's black—and his eyes were those Irish blue ones that are "smudged in" with black lashes, luminous, quick sparkling, softly darkening, wooing, winning, faithless eyes—an actor's eyes par excellence, but with a droop of the heavily [Pg 101] fringed lids that played sad havoc with the dreams of the romantic girl patrons of the theatre.

Stewart Thrall was a popular idol. His stroll down the sweet sunny side of Broadway was a triumphal progress. Glances, smiles, turning heads, and flattering remarks trailed after him like a tail to the kite of his vogue. He had earned his popularity—it had not been thrust upon him. He had been shrewd and clever and determined. He had acted up to the motto of his choice: "To be agreeable." He made everything serve him. If he had a friend in a high place he never forgot it or allowed anyone else to forget it either. If he went occasionally to church on a fine Sunday, where wealthy pewholders vied with one another in courteous hospitality, he saw to it that that was the church attended by his banker. "The recollection will do him no harm and may do me a service," he would say to himself with a laugh. When he went to a dance he never failed to bestow attentions upon any homely girl or woman who wore jewels, and in more than one instance the effects of such a one's gratitude had been distinctly felt in the box-office.

But these wealthy wall-flowers were never waltzed with. The very prettiest girl in the room could be relied upon to arrange her card to favor this man with the speaking eyes. And so, with drooping lids in full evidence, he swayed and whirled, reversed and backed, apparently by instinct, since his challenging glance never left his partner's face. He would think triumphantly of the two birds he had brought down with one stone, winning gratitude from one and a flirtation [Pg 102] from another.

Nor did he fail "to be agreeable" to humble people, for no one knew better than he how swift were the ups and downs of his profession. Therefore, he treated with friendly consideration the "nobody" who might be a "somebody" the next time he saw him. Gravely respectful to the gray old solid men of commerce, hail fellow with that body of men known as "the boys," gambling just enough to keep in friendly touch with the big guns of the business, and seemingly ready to give up his very soul to the reporters, he was a matinée idol, a successful man, a general favorite. And yet, after all, disappointed; so many brief, transient loves had he known; so many charming hypocrites had made a farce of the grand passion, depriving it of any touch of sanctity, that now an apathetic weariness had come upon him, and yet that was not the worst. No one could have

forced the confession from him, but in his heart he admitted his defeat. He had started out to win fame, but had attained only notoriety; and though he sneered and said to himself: "Fame has generally gone hungry, and I at least am well fed and have a nice little story to read in my bank-book," he was, all the same, a disappointed man.

As he turned to toss the paper wrapper and bits of ribbon from his parcel into the waste-basket his eyes encountered a picture of himself as the young Laertes. And he paused, looked at it frowningly, and commented: "You poor young fool! What a burning mass of hope and ambition you were! So honestly believing in acting as a veritable art, and—and forgetting everything in the [Pg 103] joy of it! Damned if you didn't! But Lord! that was before you found your motto and began 'to be agreeable' to the world! Couldn't serve two gods, could you, sonny? Well, being agreeable has paid, in some ways. But I have put up with your reproachful glances long enough. I think I'll take you down from there and send you over to the Missus. You won't hurt her the way you do me!" And, with a half-laughing, half-frowning face, he stepped on a low couch, that he might reach and lift down the offending, boyish Laertes.

He hurried a bit, for he knew that Claire Morrell was very exact in keeping her appointments, and that she might come in at any moment now, with her confounded stage-struck protégée, to whom he would never have given a thought, let alone an engagement, for he hated amateurs, had it not been that he had met the clever and witty, if ancient, Mrs. Van Camp, and knew her to be of the best old Dutch stock. Therefore, it would rather flatter his vanity to be able to exploit the name of her god-daughter as a member of his company, if only she might not be too heavy a load of awkward self-consciousness—if only she might be moderately good-looking. And then he set the picture down hard, with its long wire hooping, and coiling, like a live and very angry thing about it, and whistled, exclaiming aloud: "Oh, by Jove! I wonder if either of those bright and pretty girls the Morrell had with her last night might be the protégée? They were both charming, but how that dark one did light up when Morrell led the applause for my Queen Mab speech! But [Pg 104] no such luck, I suppose!"

And, man-fashion, he drew out his handkerchief to dust the small wingless Love on the pedestal between the draped curtains of a mock-window, whose long Holland shade really covered a very narrow door, spring locked and never used—never, one could readily understand that from the inconvenience of its approach, but Mr. Thrall carried the key.

And out in Broadway Claire Morrell was saying: "It's so very tiring, this shopping; suppose, Miss Lawton, that we step in at the theatre and see if Mr. Thrall is there now, instead of making a special trip to-morrow. If he is in he will see us, if he has gone home we can cool off in the dark auditorium. What do you say, Miss Dorothy?"

For Miss Morrell had kept her talk with the manager and her appointment a secret, feeling that Sybil would thus be more at her ease, more natural in manner, than she could possibly be if she knew she was being inspected or examined, like a servant seeking a new place. And now, as the sisters smilingly consented to her plan, she turned in between the big billboards that announced the week's run of "Romeo and Juliet," with the name of the lady star in very, very large letters and "supported by" in small type. Then the name of the gentleman who played Romeo appeared in letters two sizes smaller than those of the star, and lower down, in quite small type, one read: "Mr. Stewart Thrall as Mercutio."

And Sybil tapped the letters with her parasol-tip, and said: "His performance was the best in the [Pg 105] play. Why are his letters not the biggest?"

And the actress laughed, as she answered: "Children always ask difficult questions. Wait till you're older, my dear. Perhaps this time next year all this mystery of type and printers' ink will be clear to your understanding. But you are right about the acting of Thrall; his Mercutio is the best of his time."

She went to the box-office window, and learning from the half-strangled Barney that the manager was in his private office, she swept them across the vestibule, from whose walls the gold-framed pictured actors looked down inquiringly, tapped at a door, and, in answer to a cheery "Entrez!" entered the room, crying: "May I bring up my light infantry?"

And in answer to his laughing "By all means—I'm in need of reinforcements, you know!" she drew the girls inside, saying: "The Misses Lawton, Mr. Thrall, who ask of your grace a few moments hospitality and rest, as they, like myself, are country bred, and therefore easily shop-wearied."

"Well, none of you are shop-worn, at all events!" He laughed, as he found seats for them by the simple process of sweeping manuscripts, sheet-music, and what-not from the chair to the floor in a corner.

"Ah!" exclaimed Miss Morrell to the girls, "would he not make a blithe and bonnie housekeeper?"

And Sybil acquiesced with: "A place for everything and everything in that one place," while Thrall drew up the shade of the one real window, and let the full light into the dull red room, showing the age-blackened, iron-heavy, splendidly carved table and desk and chair and the freshness of [Pg 106] the two young creatures looking up at him with such honest admiration in their innocent eyes as to fairly embarrass him. And, so strange a thing is memory, for just one moment he was a boy again in roundabout jacket and broad white collar, and his only sister, seventeen years old, stood at the altar with her young minister bridegroom, and looked at him with just such sweetly innocent eyes. He shook his head sharply and passed his hand across his eyes. His sister had

been dead these twenty years—what had come over him?

And then Miss Morrell, who had been peering under and over everything in the room, asked, plaintively: "Where is it, Stewart, mon ami? What have you done with it? Am I to die before your eyes from sheer exhaustion, and without even an effort on your part to save me?"

And he, pointing to a hanging cabinet, said: "There's the life-saving station!" and threw open the door, revealing a complete outfit for coffee-making. Then, noting the girls' surprised looks, he went on: "Ah! I see you are not very well acquainted with my friend here, or has she been clever enough to conceal her dissipation? Be that as it may, we have here an awful example—a victim to ——"

"Stewart Thrall!" threateningly exclaimed Miss Morrell, as she lighted the spirit-lamp beneath the coffee-pot.

"A victim to coffee! Morning, noon, or night, her one cry is 'Coffee!' Ah, it's sad! Such a promising young-creature as she was, too! But you see what coffee has brought her to!" [Pg 107]

"I'll buy a French pot and a bottle of alcohol on the way home," laughed Sybil, "and see where it will land me!"

"Gracious!" cried Dorothy, "you will land in a sanitarium if you attempt to increase the amount of coffee you are taking already!"

"Oh, are you one of the devotees of the little brown berry?" asked Miss Morrell. "Well, we are three, then, for that man there adores it, in spite of his jibes at me!"

"I drink but a reasonable amount," declared Thrall, "while you—Miss Lawton, will you push that biscuit-jar this way? Do you know, when the rehearsal is called, this enslaved creature drinks coffee because work is beginning. Later she drinks coffee because work is over. When it is cold, she drinks coffee to warm her. When it is warm, she drinks coffee to cool her!"

"My very dear friend," interrupted Miss Morrell, "there is a strangely familiar sound about all that. Do you really believe no one else ever heard of Thackeray?"

"And Thackeray's daughter?" laughed Sybil.

"Who read Dickens," added Dorothy, with dancing eyes.

"'When she was glad, she read Dickens,'" quoted Miss Morrell.

"'When she was sad, she read Dickens,'" added Sybil. [Pg 108]

"So you see, sir," continued the actress, "even if quotations are not exact to the letter, they are sufficient to prove you are a plagiarist!"

"Good heavens! Who would have believed so many people remembered a man named Thackeray!" said Thrall, with mock astonishment. "Now Vanity Fair forgets him entirely."

"A very natural revenge! Who cares to remember the artist who paints an unflattering portrait? Poor Vanity Fair wanted to be idealized a bit. Oh, wait, Stewart—wait! Don't pour yet, there's a cigar-clip and a postage-stamp in the bottom of that cup! Now pour! If only you could be induced to write a few 'Household Hints' for the aid of young house-keepers!"

"Yes! My services to domestic science would about equal in value my services to art!" he jeered.

Honest little Dorothy, accepting the Sèvres cup extended to her, lifted clear blue eyes to her host's face, saying: "You should not speak so contemptuously of what you have done, Mr. Thrall. If acting is an art, as persons say, a man who acts Shaksperian characters very beautifully does a real service to that art—I think!"

"Bravo!" cried Miss Morrell, tapping her spoon against her cup. "Bravo, little play-lover! A charming compliment, and a very just rebuke also for your insincerity of speech, Stewart, my friend!"

And he, jumping to the conclusion that it was Dorothy who wanted to go upon the stage, felt a pang of disappointment that surprised him by its sharpness, as he somewhat gravely answered: [Pg 109]
"It was not insincere. You know well enough," nodding his head toward Claire Morrell, "that this week's return to the fountain-head of English drama has not been made from love or from a desire to improve public taste. You know it is but a catch-penny device—an advertisement. I might"—he glanced at the wrapt face of the young Laertes as he spoke—"I might have served art once. Indeed, I know it; but"—he laughed a hard little laugh—"art and mammon are no more to be served by the same man than God and mammon, and he who serves art entirely and lovingly will have mighty little to show for his labor!"

"At least," broke in Sybil, hotly, with dark face aglow, "he would have the joy of his unskimped service and the comfort of a thorough self-respect!"

And again Thrall felt that swift pang of regret that this was not the stage aspirant. For to himself he had been saying: "These innocent, wholesome girls are two buds in the garden of life. This fair one, like a pale blush-rose, reaches her most perfect beauty now, in the close-folded bud form; later its perfect blossoming will reveal it pale and shallow, though very sweet. But the other one, she with the lustrous eyes and the mutinous red mouth, is like one of the red damask buds of

Southern France, now ideally beautiful, yet the opening of velvety petals will betray depth after depth of deepening color, free wave after wave of perfume, until the very sweetest, the very purest tint of glowing color, will be found at last in the deep splendor of the fully open heart! Yes, this girl will blossom into a splendid womanhood. And what a face for the stage!" [Pg 110]

And then he was aware of Miss Morrell setting down her cup and saying, briskly: "A little business now, Mr. Manager, if you please! Miss Lawton here is very keen to go upon the stage. She is immensely ambitious, absolutely without experience, but humble in mind enough to be willing to begin at the bottomest bottom. I would gladly give her her start in my company, if I had room for her, and I would not ask you to consider her wish if I did not truly believe she had in her the making of a good actress."

Mr. Thrall turned surprised eyes toward the happily smiling Dorothy. Sybil had gone white when her friend began to speak for her, and sat still and cold, waiting for her doom.

"In heaven's name!" thought he. "What has come to the Morrell—to think that child can act?" Then he glanced at the rigid figure of Sybil, and said, slowly: "And you—have you no desire for the stage life?"

She raised her dark eyes, and said, very low: "I would give my soul to act!"

Miss Morrell's nervous fingers closed sharply. She wished the girl had not said that, and in the same instant Dorothy exclaimed: "Oh, Miss Morrell, Mr. Thrall thought you were speaking of me!"

And actor as he was, the man turned suddenly to his desk to hide the color he knew was burning over his face, and the senseless delight that flashed through him at the words. Presently he asked if her friends permitted her to take this step. Being reassured on that point, he inquired if she [Pg 111] had had any experience as an amateur. And when she replied "No!" with a sadly fallen countenance, he smilingly commented: "No tears are called for yet!"

And Miss Morrell broke in with: "And no lessons in elocution has she had—no, not one!"

"Thank God!" fervently exclaimed Thrall. "Decidedly, your case looks hopeful, Miss Lawton."

After some further conversation, finding Sybil would be in town for a day or two, he asked permission to call on her at Mrs. Van Camp's home and let her know what his decision was. As he spoke he caught the swift expression of anxiety on Dorothy's face and followed her glance, and, noting the close attention Sybil was bestowing on a picture, knew she was hiding the tears of disappointment, of fear, and felt a throb of sympathy. Poor little soul! Had he not been just as impatient, just as sensitive—once? So, while Dorothy gathered up the fans and parcels, and Miss Morrell paused to place a candied violet between her lips, Stewart Thrall stepped close to Sybil's side, and said, very low: "Don't be distressed—you shall have the engagement. Only I don't know yet just how or where I can place you!"

And the incredulous joy flashing through the tears, the tremulous smile on her lips, as she turned her face to him, made him exclaim, mentally: "Good God! If she could do but the half of that upon the stage!"

Then, as they were ready to depart, ever punctually exact in the small courtesies, he placed himself at Miss Morrell's side and led the way to the vestibule, where a tall, shabby fellow was [Pg 112] slouching before the box-office window, while young Barney could be plainly heard refusing to give him money without Mr. Thrall's order.

Hearing advancing footsteps, the man turned a pale, liquor-soddened face toward them, and, seeing the ladies, he let go of the window-ledge he had clung to, removed his hat with a trembling hand, advanced hesitatingly, and attempted to address Thrall, who said, savagely: "Step aside! I'll speak to you presently!" And, as the poor wreck drew back, they passed on to the open front doors.

And Claire Morrell raised mildly surprised eyes, and said: "Jim Roberts is still with you, then?"

And Thrall, with a shrug of his shoulders, answered, flippantly: "Like the poor!" and bowed them out. [Pg 113]

CHAPTER XI

THE DOUBLE BIRTHDAY

With June a renewal of life seemed to have come to the old White house. A riotous maple massed its vivid green canopy over a side door, tender young vines with small, tenacious fingers felt their way over its southern wall, an old-time peony at the corner of the porch lifted its enormous, bitter-sweet blossoms of deepest pink. A length of white matting lay on the porch, two neatly painted butter-tubs (in lieu of majolica jars) held plants, a few chairs and a table kept them company, and every wind that blew the white curtains in or out of the upper windows brought forth a ripple of laughter or a snatch of song. For the old house had received the gift of tongues,

and spoke, not only with the voice of age and disappointment and regret, but with that of youth and hope and joy; and Dick's yellow throat, like a small golden ewer, poured forth trill and gurgle all day long in happy answer to all the delightful sounds about him. And two little paths were creeping through the thick-growing grass—one, leading up to the tangle of orchard and an oft-mended old hammock, had been worn by the feet of the sisters; the other, leading down to a side lane, was shorter but broader, for Lena's feet were sturdy, her step heavy, and her "mash-man's" [Pg 114] whistle called her often to the lane in the twilight. So, with love flitting about the kitchen door and youth and beauty dreaming dreams in its ancient chambers, no wonder the White house seemed rejuvenated.

Sybil was happy—happy as she had never been before. Nothing definite had yet been decided beyond the fact that she was to begin her work in September. Mr. Thrall might let her play a small part in New York, or he might send her with a travelling company and let her have something better to start with. Meantime, he had advised her to learn several small parts, and when she had done so, swiftly and willingly, he told her it would be good practice for her to study a number of important characters, since she might be called upon to play a Jessica or a Nerissa, if not the difficult Portia, a Celia, if not a Rosalind; and it would give her an immense advantage if she were already familiar with the lines, while, if she had not to play any of them, she would herself be the richer for her knowledge and her brain would be trained to the habit of quick study.

Then Mrs. Van Camp, flattered by the popular actor's deferential attitude toward herself and his warily moderate admiration for Sybil—well he knew that any rapturous praise of her beauty would act as a danger-signal to the ancient butterfly of fashion—had not only consented to her god-daughter's going upon the stage, but for a birthday gift had lined her hungry little purse with crisp bank-notes, of modest denomination, it is true, but with power to free her from the care of [Pg 115] things bodily and temporal for all that coming summer, and had added a note to her "very dear Letitia" earnestly requesting her "not to make a fool of herself!"

So Sybil, having passed the pocketbook over to Dorothy's management, knowing that she would get twice as much out of it, gave herself up to study and to dreams.

John Lawton's misty old eyes noted how she sweetened under this small ray of prosperity; missed the old sharpness from her tongue, the sting from her words; saw the increase in her beauty, and was tortured with shame that his child's happiness came to her from strangers. His wistful, apologetic eyes often hurt Sybil to the heart, and one morning, on her way to the orchard, play-book in hand, she saw him leaning against the grape arbor, gazing at her with such jealous pain in his face that suddenly she understood, and, throwing an arm about his neck, she exclaimed: "I am so happy, father, I just have to stop and thank you!" and she kissed him soundly.

He drew away a little, saying, incredulously: "Thank me? Your happiness does not come from me, poor little one; to my sorrow, dear—to my sorrow!"

"Not from you?" cried the girl. "Why—why, what could I have done without your consent, dada? That was the very corner-stone of my whole plan!"

His face brightened, then clouded again, as he asked, hesitatingly: "Supposing I—had—refused, daughter; would—would that have made any difference to you?"

"Oh, father!" cried Sybil, reproachfully, "you would have closed the incident with a vengeance—I [Pg 116] could not have moved another step!" Seeing the troubled old face beginning to brighten, she laid her arm upon his shoulder, and added: "Everything depended on your word. No one wanted to help a girl who had not the backing of her own father. So, you see, all hung on your 'yes' or 'no,' dear!"

And the poor old gentleman, comforted and heartened up, kissed her and patted her back and told her, quite patronizingly, she should have had more confidence in his willingness to assist her, and, seeing she was studying Jessica that morning, he devoted himself to a careful reading of Shylock down under the monster willow. Thus Sybil, with passions and desires all sleeping, studied and dreamed, and wondered vaguely would she always be unknown, or would she, some day, some far away radiant day, be a crowned Queen of the Drama?

And to Dorothy—the patient, practical Dorothy, who knew to the hour how long a pound of tea would last; who knew to a spoonful how much sugar, salt, or baking-powder there was in the house—there had come a habit of musing, a trick of sudden and utter abstraction at the most improbable moments, when her hands would drop idly at her sides, and, gazing into space, she would wonder vaguely why all her anxieties, worries, and annoyances could be so swiftly drowned in the depths of a pair of gray eyes, whose steely look always darkened and softened when their owner spoke to her. For so swift is the blossoming of love when once the magic hour has struck, that already Leslie Galt, the friend of three weeks' standing, was her reliance and her [Pg 117] ever-quoted authority.

Sybil quite understood the situation, and when she jibed gently at the girl's fits of abstraction, Dorothy would answer nothing, save with smile and blush and dimple, and surely they were eloquent enough.

John Lawton, considering his daughters as mere well-grown babes, saw nothing but a liking for himself in young Galt's visits, and Letitia's usually quick eyes were so dazzled by a certain jack-o'-lantern of her own discovery that she saw in the young man only a patient listener, whom she

believed she was training to fetch and carry quite nicely.

The discordant note in all this melody of love was William Henry Bulkley. The overbearing, consequential manner, the fine raiment, and the red face and neck of the elderly beau aroused the imagination of Lena, and she named him "Dat Herr Gobbler-mans," and it was with ill-suppressed laughter and but half-hearted severity that Miss Dorothy called her to account for her disrespect; and Lena, somewhat sullenly, made answer that "she guessed she had youst as much respect for der Herr Bulkley as der Herr Bulkley has for himself. For her mash-mans, he knowed some tings about——"

"Lena!" interrupted Dorothy, warningly. "Lena!" And Lena, catching the laughing eyes of Sybil, grinned broadly back at her while in the very act of making her apologetic peasant bob to Dorothy, and murmuring: "Oxcuse me! I don't make mit der Herr Gobbler name, nein! no more!" [Pg 118]

She retired to the kitchen, while the laughing Sybil inquired of Dorothy how much she thought she had gained by her lecture on propriety to the sharp little German girl.

'Twas well for all of them that Mrs. Lawton had not heard of the "Herr Gobbler" episode, for she alone approved of William Henry Bulkley, she alone greeted him warmly, effusively, and urged him to repeat his patronizing visits. She passed much of her time in trying to appraise at its exact value that long gloating look of admiration he had bestowed upon the fair Dorothy that day of his first visit to them, back in May. Like a very small cat in waiting for a very large mouse, she sat with unwinking eyes, with sharply alert ears, with every strained nerve ready, like a sensitive whisker, to warn her back from a dangerously tight place, and watched tensely, patiently watched, ready to spring upon the silky-coated, cheese-fed big mouse and drag him in triumph to the feet of her little white kitten, whom she would instruct to pat him judiciously, with velvet paw, or tear punitively, with sharp curved claws, just as pussy-mamma should think fit. Nothing in all Letitia Lawton's silly, superficial life had betrayed so completely her absolute selfishness as did this eager desire to secure a son-in-law in the person of William Henry Bulkley. Her knowledge of the man in the past, and the piteous picture her memory held of Mrs. Bulkley's pale, fast-thinning face, when, bravely hiding her wounded pride and slain affection, she received her sympathetically prying neighbors with uncomplaining chill courtesy, but such woful eyes, [Pg 119] that they had withdrawn without daring to speak one word of condemnation against the man of whom a certain splendid infamy had but recently caused it to be said: "Why, his conduct brings a blush of shame to the cheek of impropriety's self!"

These memories should have filled her mother's heart with sick repulsion, but, instead, it was filled with fallacies. His conduct had not been quite what it should have been, perhaps, but then, no one knew—perhaps his wife had not been entirely faultless. She may not have been a suitable companion for so jovial and high-spirited a man. She had probably not known how to manage him. Now she herself had had no such trouble with her husband, though, of course, she had been a much prettier woman than had been the late Mrs. Bulkley. Then he had been a very wealthy man (Letitia's eyes gleamed at the thought), and much was to be forgiven to the wealthy, they were more tried and tempted than other men, and—and—oh, well! someone had said that a man had to break the heart of one wife before he learned how to care properly for a second one. Dorothy, too, was so young and unsuspicious that he would probably justify her sweet confidence in him, while she, Letitia, would keep her eyes very wide open. Not that she would ever interfere between husband and wife—not she! But still there could be no harm in keeping a mother's eye upon what was going on. And then, her very soul hungered after the unforgotten flesh-pots. She calculated to a nicety what William Henry would in common decency have to do for the parents of his bride. They could not be left in that shackly old White house, that was sure; and, of course, [Pg 120] she would pay very long visits to her daughter, and—and assist her in guiding her household. Almost she felt the caressing touch of rich furs about her; in imagination she ordered "the brougham," and closely inspected the liveries of the men on the box; and, in fact, was so dazzled with the gleam of Mr. Bulkley's money, so a-hungered for the flesh-pots in his keeping, that she was almost blinded to the sin and shame and degradation that covered his moral character like a leprosy. Yet, not quite—surely not quite! Else why was she so silent as to her wild hopes? A secret she had never kept in all her life before! For years she had crowded the portals of John Lawton's unwilling ears with not only her own secrets but all those she could come by of other people's. Why, then, did she often catch herself up, in that expansive and confidential chat or monologue, peculiar to the marital chamber?

Why did she press her thin, rouge-tinted lips so closely and stop so suddenly every time she started to speak of a "splendid chance"? Whose "chance" was she thinking of, and why did she not complete her sentence?

John, slow John, began to wonder to himself. It was odd. All her married life Letitia had exalted herself—had proclaimed herself; her superiority, mentally and spiritually, had usurped the husband's authority; yet now it was that helpless, broken gentleman, whose pathetic eyes she shrank from meeting, into whose ears she dared not pour her shameful secret wish: to marry little Dorothy to William Henry Bulkley. [Pg 121]

Slow and uncertain, foolishly trustful, weak as he had been in business matters, there was a certain austerity in John Lawton's moral character. His life had been singularly clean and wholesome. He had known how to resist the temptations that many men consider it rather "goody-goody" or "middle-class" to resist. The "high-roller" and the gambler he classed together, but the immoral married man was, to his old-fashioned belief, the man unspeakable! And that was why Letitia was learning to keep a secret! She, the tyrant, was afraid of her slave! So John

Lawton was the only person in that house who was not dreaming dreams or weaving plans for the future! He was like a mossy stone, immovable, in the middle of a gentle stream. The water does not rush over it, but parts and races about it with touches of white caressing foam, then joins again below it and continues on in one united stream.

But this June day was a special one in the Lawton family, since on it fell the birthdays of both Mrs. Lawton and Sybil; a fact sufficiently unusual to justify the mentioning of it, according to Mrs. Lawton's ideas, though her doing so to such mere acquaintances as Mr. Galt and Mr. Bulkley covered the girls with mortification. "Poor Sybil!" said Dorothy, sympathetically, when the mother had mentioned the interesting coincidence to the second gentleman, "but don't mind, dear! Anyone can see you are innocent of—of——"

"Of giving a disgracefully broad hint! Oh, what is coming to mamma! Her pride—where is it? Poor papa simply tries to hide his needs, as mamma did formerly, at least from strangers. She would always demand help from any relative, but of late—oh, nothing is so humiliating as the hint [Pg 122] direct! There's no use denying it, mamma reminds me of one of those creamy-white, fine silky sponges——"

"Oh, don't!" almost whispered Dorothy. "For truly, I'd a great deal rather hear her say boldly: 'Stand and deliver!'" At which both girls had broken into laughter.

Now Sybil, who had read his signs of love aright from the first, was greatly admired and honestly liked by young Galt, and he was quick to turn to her when he needed a friend at court. Sybil had noted the swift disappointment clouding his face when he learned that it was not Dorothy who shared the honors of the twenty-fifth of June with Mrs. Lawton. More, with swift intuition she had even guessed the exact gift he wished to offer her young sister; for, being very short of fans, Mrs. Lawton, when on dress parade, nearly always took Dorrie's little fan from her, with "Just for a moment, my dear," which moment generally reached to her final withdrawal, while the owner meantime crimped up a sheet of newspaper with which to fan her flushed cheeks or defend herself from the persistent fly. And Galt's brows would knit and his lips twitch nervously as he helplessly noted the need of his Violet Girl. So it was easy to guess, when Mrs. Lawton had, with joyous abandon, confided to him the date of the double birthday, that a fan for his adored was the first thought that sprang into his mind, and lo! the name of Sybil dashed all his hopes to flinders.

Though she laughed at his disappointed face, she felt sorry for him too, and determined to help [Pg 123] him to his wish if possible, for she argued: "He simply can't help himself; he is forced to accept that coy hint—not more than a yard broad—of mamma's offering, but I think he is a gentleman sufficiently well-bred not to humiliate us with extravagant offerings, and he ought to have the pleasure of remembering Dorrie." So: "Mr. Galt!" she cried, "will you help me fasten up a bit of vine on the side of the house? It's just above my reach." And, as he obediently followed her, she continued: "Now, you may weep unobserved."

He looked frowningly at her, and she went on: "You are not going to deny your vexed disappointment, are you?"

A wry smile twisted his lips as he murmured: "I beg your pardon— I did not mean— I was not aware——"

"No, I suppose not," she laughed; "but you must better control your features or wear a good heavy veil, to hide them, after this."

"Good Lord! What an idiot you must think me," he said. "But honesty is the best policy, and I admit I want awfully to offer a certain trifle to Dor—to Miss Dorothy, and I fancied the opportunity had arrived, and—and——"

"And it hadn't!" laughed Sybil. "But see here, now, you don't know much about our family—you are a stranger to us."

"Oh! Miss Sybil!" gasped Leslie Galt. "That's downright cruel. You said the other day——"

"Do be still!" snapped Sybil, "and attend to what I am saying. You are—or you ought to be—a stranger yet to the Lawton family history. You have learned of a double birthday, and you wish to [Pg 124] mark the occasion with some small remembrances; but, for the life of you, being a stranger, you can't remember which girl it is who shares the day with Mrs. Lawton, therefore——"

But Galt, with a whoop, had both her hands in his, crying, rapturously: "Oh, you angel! You angel! Of course I am uncertain, and so I have taken the liberty! Oh, what a blessed little brick you are!" and on that hint he acted.

So, on this twenty-fifth of June, many kisses had been exchanged, some piteously small gifts offered and joyously accepted. A few mixed roses, with very plenteous greens, were presented by the tremulous hand of John Lawton to his Letitia, but he had laid aside all the deep red ones, then made them into a knot, with thorns all carefully removed, and, as he kissed his first-born daughter on lip and brow and from his soul wished happy returns of the day, he laid them against her rounded throat, and said: "Because they are so like you, dear!"

Later in the day Leslie Galt drove up in the dusty old station hack, carrying in one hand his mandolin and in the other a basket of the choicest, rarest fruits, prettily decorated with vines and blossoms. These being accepted, he next brought forth two slim parcels in white wrappers—but standing before Mrs. Lawton, and suddenly conscious that Sybil's laughing eyes were upon him,

he blushed and stammered and lied his lie, so redly, so confusedly, that anyone would have sworn he told the truth, and did not know which girl to congratulate. And Mrs. Lawton clapped her [Pg 125] hands in juvenile delight, and gave consent to Dorothy's acceptance of the gift. "She really had no right to, naughty thing!"

And the boxes being opened revealed two little Empire fans: one a bit of scarlet gauze, gold flecked in sandal frame, and the other of cream-tinted silk, which some true artist's hand had showered thick with violets so heavenly blue, so mauve, so white, so real that involuntarily one bent to catch the perfume. No apportionment had been made at all, yet with a single blue gleam of an upward glancing eye, a swirl of color in a peachy cheek, Dorothy put out her hand unhesitatingly and claimed her own, thus proving that she knew herself to be the Violet Girl, and Sybil, fluttering her gay fan above her head, said, aside to Galt: "I suppose then, I am a sort of dahlia-girl or a—a—hibiscus-girl?" And he, being merry and light of heart because of that sweet, comprehending blue-eyed glance, caught up the mandolin and sang in answer: "My love is like the red, red rose!" At this Mrs. Lawton, speaking against a rather large portion of fruit which gave her words a somewhat muffled sound, remarked that "that used to be a very popular air in her own blooming days. She had been serenaded by it once; that is, those who serenaded her sang it; and a public singer—oh, mercy goodness!" coughed and choked the fruit-eater. Then, the unexpected pit having been ejected from her throat, she proceeded, with quite watery eyes—"A public singer, of no breeding at all, no offence meant to you, Sybil, though of course you will not be a singer—but she was stopping a few days next door, and if you'll believe me, that creature [Pg 126] came to her window and bowed and smiled, when my serenaders sang: 'Red, red rose!' Her name, by the way, was Roze—with a z, you understand, not an s. Did you ever hear of anything more incredibly impertinent? Well, I was a very pretty woman in those days! Sybil, here, is almost my exact image—not quite so rich in coloring, perhaps, even now. You may have noticed my color is good for a poor buried-alive creature who knew only luxury in the past and knows only penury in the present. I'm sorry I ate the last of those strange Japanese plums; I meant to save one to show to John. Yes, that's right, practice a little, my dears—as much as you like—but—but if that is what you are going to do I won't urge this fruit upon you—it's fatal to the voice."

And thus it was that Sybil took her place at the piano—which she hated—and played accompaniments stumblingly but cheerfully, because she knew that, to the pair behind her, singing together thus unobserved by others was as the joy of Paradise.

And finally it was upon the picture of Leslie Galt, bending over and half encircling Dorothy with his arm, as he tenderly placed her unaccustomed little hands in position to hold the mandolin correctly, that William Henry Bulkley stumbled, and stood and glared and mentally swore. Loaded with gifts whose expense made their acceptance a humiliation, he had, without hesitation, included Dorothy in his list of recipients, and oddly enough he too presented a fan—a gorgeous affair of white ostrich plumes mounted on sticks of carved white pearl; and when Mrs. [Pg 127] Lawton had rather sharply commanded its acceptance by the reluctant girl, Sybil remarked, sweetly: "It is so beautiful, and will be so useful when you attend balls or the opera, my dear! I suppose you will hardly care to carry it with a white linen gown to church, will you?" And truly Mr. Bulkley could have strangled her. The men understood each other in an instant, and each measured the other swiftly and savagely. Leslie Galt, who was supposed to be a very poor young lawyer, yielded not one inch before the old friend-of-the-family air of the wealthy visitor, and held his place by his Violet Girl's side as long as it was possible. He was quick to recognize Mrs. Lawton's efforts to throw Dorothy and Bulkley together, and he was filled with a sick rage as he saw the blasé old eyes greedily devouring the innocent loveliness of the girl he adored.

This undercurrent of concealed hatred made itself so plainly felt that no one was sorry when the little party broke up. Mr. Bulkley, after using a heavy gold-handled pocket knife in cutting some cord from his parcels, had left it on the piano. As he was leaving he remembered it and thought to secure a few moments alone with Dorothy, so he paused at the porch-step and with amazing ill-breeding called familiarly to Dorothy to bring his knife to him. But Leslie Galt, black-browed, took the knife from her a moment, and, going to Mr. Bulkley, said, as he extended it to him: "Permit me to be your servant, sir, for this occasion!"

For a moment they glared at each other, then Bulkley went his way, saying to himself: "The impudent young upstart!" while Galt turned back, muttering, with curling lip: "Gross old animal!" [Pg 128]

And when Mrs. Lawton had moaned several times that she "did not know—no, she was sure she did not know—what was the matter with dear Mr. Bulkley that day," Sybil, on mischief bent, whispered to Galt: "Do you know what is the matter with him, by any chance?"

And the young man's eyes were very hard and bright as he replied, slowly: "Yes, I know what is the matter with him," and then, with a grim smile, he added, "just as well as he knows what is the matter with me!" [Pg 129]

CHAPTER XII

THE PROMISED CROWN

The Globe Theatre had closed for the summer and the season had ended in the triumphant

manner desired by the manager. He had waved his flags and beaten his tin pans lustily up to the very last moment, and had successfully hived the public's swarm of bees in his theatre, as the honey in the box-office amply proved. Nothing that made for this success had been too small to receive personal attention, so even that city directory-like quarter column of "among those present were" had been cleverly made to serve him through his careful and judicious introduction of the names of two or three of the great nouveau riche, among the fashionably holy ones of the Vandergrifts, the Asteroids, the revolutionary Byrds, the colonial Fishers, the Carmichaels, and the Vinelanders, etc.—not, mind you, as of them, but as notedly close students of Shakspere. Oh, what a court-jester was lost in Thrall!

These very new rich men, who, had they owned a folio of earliest edition, would eagerly have swapped it for an édition de luxe of to-day and given fifty dollars to boot—so much they knew of Shakspere—were nevertheless filled with joy to see their names in that dear list, "among those present were." And their gratitude to the man who had worked the miracle for them would take [Pg 130] the form of steady attendance in the future, of many box parties, of loud public praise.

So, with these additions to his sure clientèle, the season closed, and Manager Thrall, at first amused and then annoyed by the haunting memory of a twice seen face, accepted, as had been his wont in former summers, an invitation to join a gay yachting party, only to find himself more or less bored. Eating too much, drinking too much, and smoking like a chimney palled on him. The stories told were all frankly old or poorly revamped, and he grumbled one night that "chestnuts in summer-time were an anomaly!"

A young sap-head, dizzy with champagne, gazing at him in heavy-eyed admiration, remarked: "Isn't he deep? Must be college man, eh—Thrall? I'm pretty f-fly myself; I know 'chestnut' a-and 'summer,' but 'n-nomaly' puts me out in the first round!"

And with a pencil and paper he went about almost tearfully, begging people to explain the meaning of the word "anomaly"; and each one appealed to wrote out a more wildly absurd definition than had the man before him, which was a highly intellectual amusement indeed.

Only one thing had power to lay, for a little while, the lovely, dark-eyed ghost haunting the actor, and that was poker—the great American game played with the aid of the gayly colored pasteboards and an astonishing vocabulary, containing, among other things, "kitties," "antes," and "lob—" no, "jack-pots." A long line of "flushes," "straights"—royal, bob-tailed; and people [Pg 131] "came in" and "went out" and "stood pat," and "opened things" and "shut them," and, indeed, did so much in the course of the wonderful game that it claimed the whole attention and left no room for memories of any kind. Still poker could not go on all the time, and finally when one night all hands went ashore to attend a hotel-hop, Thrall, the waltzer par excellence, suddenly realized that each frisky young matron, each pretty débutante who so readily honored him, was being measured by the standard of Sybil's beauty. This one he found slender to the point of angularity; that one plump to the verge of lost outlines; another pretty but crudely overdressed; while the fair face that seemed floating before him as on waves of melody, with the almost sullen red mouth that could flash into smiles of such penetrating sweetness, the sensitive color, wavering, fading, flaming again, the level, tragic brows and dark eyes, in which burning passion still slept, but lightly—he knew but lightly—was, he told himself, "simply incomparable"! And then he pulled up short, saying, angrily: "What in the devil's name has come to me? Am I a green boy to be bowled over and left sprawling in the dust by a glance from a pair of fine eyes? Eyes owned by an inexperienced girl, too, a mere miss—one of those creatures who, knowing nothing, suspect everything, and keep you ever on guard? Bah! I hate green fruit! let me have it ripe, with all its florid coloring and rich mellowness—even if many rough experiences have left a bruised spot here or there. One can turn the blemished side away, and until the bruise becomes a taint that embitters all the pulp—then?—why then leave the fruit and seek something fresher, but not [Pg 132] green enough to be astringent to the lips."

He decided, finally, "This is a case of nerves, just such an one as women suffer from. I am at the end of a long season, I have overworked, I have lived well but not wisely—no, certainly not wisely! Result—nerves are all at loose ends, imagination over-stimulated, so that a strange face makes an unusually vivid impression. Now the thing for me to do is to see this girl's face again and let a second impression efface the first, since my imagination has, no doubt, been playing me tricks, and the real face will fall far short of the beauty of the imaginary one."

So, acting at once upon that idea, he fell back upon the perennial "business telegram" excuse, tore himself away from his jovial companions, and returned to the oven-like city, from which wild horses could not have dragged Mrs. Van Camp until August, when she left with a heavy heart and "wholly in the interest of appearances," she said. He arranged with the old lady for a business chat with her god-daughter next day but one and spent the intervening time superintending the movements of a brigade of cleaners, painters, and paper-hangers whom he had sent charging through the closed theatre—the cleaners routing out dust and dirt from stairs and floors and long-dimmed windows, the painters following and covering up head-marks, finger-marks, scratches, or bruises appearing on the white woodwork and retouching the gilding where it had darkened or worn thin; while the paper-hangers made the boxes not only fresh but most [Pg 133] attractive to women, through hanging them with the dull, lustreless velvet paper that makes such a perfect background for a careful toilette and its lovely wearer.

It was a dreary job, for surely one can find no more desolate and melancholy place in a great city than a theatre seen by daylight. From the front of the house one receives an impression of loss. The sight of an empty chair is saddening—here are a thousand of them. This dimness and

vastness, this gilding and crystal and metal that does not glisten nor glitter. The depressing silence of checked music, of vanished laughter—even an actor shivers at sight of the auditorium of a closed theatre; it is like looking on the face of a dead pleasure. But to turn about and look at the stage is even worse, so distressingly complete is the betrayal of its shabby deceptions. It is as though an admired, brilliant, and successful liar stood there who had been found out and suddenly reduced to telling the bare, bald truth. No, a day in a closed theatre during the house-cleaning period is not an enlivening experience, and Thrall told himself that that was why he looked forward so eagerly to his late afternoon call at Mrs. Van Camp's, where he was to have his business chat with Sybil.

And then when he had arrived and was being effusively greeted by Mrs. Van Camp, a gracious young figure in a white linen gown came slowly out from the shadows of the darkened room, a red damask rose drowsing on her breast, and, smiling, waited to offer him greeting; and in that moment he knew his plan had failed—the second impression would not efface the first, because [Pg 134] the real, the living face was fairer than his mental portrait of it.

So it happened that Mr. Thrall's manner toward this young would-be actress was one of dignity and reserve that was in sharp contrast to the gay freedom and almost boyish liberty of his conduct toward his ancient hostess, who did her fair share toward spoiling him. And not knowing the true cause of the swift change and difference, she could but consider him a very properly correct young man in his attitude as the manager of her namesake, Sybil Lawton; and therefore she withdrew into the far extension breakfast-room and conversed with a mumbling old parrot, who for thirty years had implored the people of his world to "scratch Polly's head," and had invariably rewarded the good Samaritan who heeded his appeal by biting viciously the hand that scratched.

Only an occasional artificial laugh from Polly reached to the dim parlor, whose white-matted floor, flowery chintz furniture covering, great Chinese screens, strange sea-shells, old portraits, and mighty china jars made a quaint eighteenth century sort of background for the white-gowned maiden with the dark, eager face, whom her father had lovingly likened to a June rose. And the ever-alert dramatic instinct of the actor-manager, working in seeming independence of the preoccupied mere man and naissant lover, took note of the room as a possible charming stage-setting for some new comedy. That instinct, keen, never sleeping, is one of the unpleasant traits in the make-up of a great actor; for there is no situation in life too sacred, no emotion even of his [Pg 135] own heart too tender not to be "used" if it seems dramatic.

And so now, through the bald, forced questions with which he began his interview, like his dignified reserve of manner, were the result of a violent restraint, he was putting upon a sudden passionate longing—an idiotic impulse that had seized him at sight of Sybil, to take her head between his hands and bury his face in the warm darkness of her cloudy hair—even that struggle with impulse did not prevent the dramatic instinct of the stage-manager from taking note of surroundings.

Presently the calm and earnest answers of the girl and his own effort at self-control restored his poise, and his more gracious manner returned to him. He found that she was faithfully devoting herself to the small parts first; and in discussing the Shaksperian characters she put questions to him anent the meaning of certain passages that more than once "gave him pause" ere he could answer them. She even so far forgot her awe of him as manager as boldly to differ with the view he took of Desdemona's character, she declaring that a greater tragedy than mere physical murder would have come about had the fair Venetian lived longer.

"No! no!" cried Sybil, "she was not the doll you think her! High-born, high-bred, musician, artist, student, over-accomplished, over-cultivated—the intellect rebelled! Over-guarded, over-restrained, repressed—nature revolted. Othello, the splendid perfection of the animal-man looming in black majesty against a background of flame and smoke, glittering in harness, blazing [Pg 136] with honors and orders, armed with barbaric weapons—his very power to destroy fascinated! Contrariety attracted and a great wave of passion swept the petted daughter of the Venetian senator into the arms of the Moorish warrior. But had she lived to regain her normal vision—to see her husband as the world saw him, merely a rough but very honest soldier, without tastes or even memories in common—she would have wearied of him and of their wandering life. She would have longed for the ease and luxury and refinement of old days. She would have sighed for the companionship of the learned and accomplished—and the beautiful "misunderstood," being no longer blind with passion, would probably have gone, girl fashion, to the other extreme and have loathed the blackness of her lord, while adoring, possibly, the whiteness of—y-e-s, there might be a worse tragedy than the dreadful murder of innocent Desdemona!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Sybil, in trepidation, for Thrall had broken into sudden, hearty laughter, "oh, are my ideas so bad as that? It's—it's horrid to be laughed at, but I suppose I have not expressed myself very clearly; only if Desdemona inherited the characteristics of her people, duplicity was as strong in her as love of luxury and appreciation of art—and a dead passion is a thing to conceal; and when concealment begins, duplicity may follow, may it not?"

She stopped suddenly; she had spoken rapidly, in impetuous self-defence. Now angry tears rushed to her eyes. "Oh," she cried, "I don't make you understand one bit! No wonder you laugh! [Pg 137] Only I feel somehow that Desdemona's was not a love that would have lasted. But I'm punished for going out beyond my depth in argument. I won't do it again!"

The fact that Sybil's reasoning had been so good made it all the harder for Thrall to explain his

laughter. Few men understood the eternal feminine better than he did; and when the young girl, with innocent, instinctive knowledge, was speaking of a "passion" as distinct from "love," her glance met his as straightly, as frankly, as if she had been a boy. And suddenly there came to him the memory of a little child he had once seen playing, ignorantly happy, with his mother's scissors and his father's knife, and he laughed aloud in spite of himself, for he knew well that the girl was clashing together her terms of "love" and "passion" with just as much real knowledge as the baby had had of the scissors and the knife. And when he saw the angry tears shining in her eyes he could have kissed them away with as pure tenderness as if she had been that baby's self.

And all the time the managerial side of his brain, so to speak, was receiving impressions and was trying to get the attention of the man's whole mind; and presently, through the smallest of incidents, it succeeded. While Thrall was trying to reassure Sybil and convince her that he had meant no mockery by his laughter, she sat with down-bent face, hiding her mortifying tears. He noted the hair, dark clouding over the straight, black brows, the outward thrust of the sullen, red lip that made and kept the whole face mutinous, when a quick glint came to the averted eyes, a [Pg 138] lift to the brows, a tremor to the lips that suddenly parted, curling like petals into the most delicious smile ever made for man's undoing. Old Poll, sidling into view and waddling across the floor in search of mischief, had caused the swift change of expression, and the expression had brought the stage-manager to the front with a bound.

"Great Shakspere!" said Thrall to himself; "what a face for the balcony scene! The sweetness—the positive radiance—the lovely outline of the down-bent face! I've half a mind—I—why, the girl has just shown she has brains, whether her ideas of Desdemona are right or wrong; it proves that she can think for herself! And—and if to her beauty, youth, and brains you can add good family, and to them all the subtle, intangible thing we call charm—what do all these things mean to a manager? Why, unless he's a dolt, a blind bat, they mean a find, a discovery, a future card of great commercial value! Dear Lord! if I only knew whether she could walk across the stage without going to pieces, whether the sight of the audience would give her a palsy!"

He had come there intending to tell her that she was to have a part of eight lines in the opening play of the New York season—but now, but now! New ideas were rushing through his mind. If only she had a little training! All at once—apropos of nothing, he asked: "Miss Lawton, do you dance?"

She raised her eyes in unspeakable surprise. [Pg 139]

His face brightened; he went on rising as he spoke: "Do you waltz?"

In a breath she was swaying in his encircling arms to the waltz he softly hummed. As they circled the big room and stopped by the window a boy went down the street, whistling high and clear, and simply from the actor-like habit of quoting, Thrall said, with a laugh:

"It was the lark—the herald of the morn!"

When, like a flash, Sybil, with pretty impatience and obstinacy, made response:

"It was the nightingale and *not* the lark,
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear!"

The surprise was so startling that Thrall caught the girl's face between his hands almost roughly, exclaiming: "Why! do you know the lines of Juliet?"

And poutingly she answered: "Does not every stage-struck girl know them?"

But he frowned: "That's no answer! Be direct in matters of business! Do you or do you not know Juliet's lines?"

She was vaguely conscious that she really ought to be angry at the liberty this man was guilty of, but she quailed at the frown and answered, meekly: "Only part of them. I studied up to the potion scene, and there I got frightened and stopped!"

"Ah!" he exclaimed; "and may I ask what frightened you?" He released her as he spoke.

"Well," she said, with her head a little to one side, as she traced the pattern on the curtain with one slim finger, "well, you see, it was night, and—and Dorrie was asleep—and—there are a good [Pg 140] many owls in our trees, and they do hoot and shiver their voices so! And they and the vault and the 'dead men's bones' rather got on my nerves, I suppose, for I only got as far as Tybalt—in his 'festering shroud'—when I was so scared I backed over to the bed and Dorrie! Oh, I didn't dare turn around, you see!"

Stewart Thrall fairly shook with laughter, in which this time both Sybil and Polly joined. Then he said at last, not without a touch of sarcasm: "It was not the fear of acting the part that disturbed you, then?"

"Oh, no!" she replied with great simplicity. "It's too soon to get frightened about that—ages too soon!" She sighed heavily: "I'm nineteen now, and I suppose I must wait years and years—five at the very least—before I dare even to hope to act Juliet? And then people say no one can play her unless they have loved."

"No one can," assented Thrall.

"Oh, well, in five years," Sybil responded, hopefully and vaguely.

"Yes," thought the man, "in far less than five years, you lovely child, you will have learned to play Juliet!"

An old engraving of Mrs. Siddons hung upon the wall, and Sybil stood looking at it. The crown the actress wore well became the high chill beauty of her face.

"Queen of the English-speaking stage," murmured Sybil. "How proud and happy she must have been! what love and homage her fame must have won from her countrymen!" Quickly turning her head, she asked: "Mr. Thrall, when you have become famous, do you forget all the bitterness of past struggles and feel like loving the whole world for very joy and gratitude?" [Pg 141]

"Having no experience to guide me, I am unable to answer your question," was the somewhat curt reply.

"Unable?" repeated the girl, all her respectful admiration writ large upon her face. "You mean ——"

"I mean," he interrupted, "that I am not famous; that now I never shall be! I started out meaning to—to win fame, but I—missed the way." He paused a moment, then went on, bitterly: "Question me about notoriety, Miss Lawton, and no man alive can give you more authentic information as to the method of its creation, its staying power, and its value. But I know not fame! If I died to-morrow I'd die like a dog—so far as memory or renown is concerned. Learn early to distinguish between the sound, noise, and rumor of notoriety and the credit, honor, and excellence of fame!"

"I'll try," the girl answered, simply, and then she added, gently: "I'm sorry you missed the way!"

A dimness came into the man's eyes as he responded, briefly, "Thank you!" and gazed at the picture that Sybil had returned to.

"Crowned queen!" she repeated. "Of course if you give me the chance, Mr. Thrall, I shall work hard for work's own sake, as well as to be a bread-winner. But all the time down in my heart I shall hope and hope that some day, in years to come, I may win a crown like that!" [Pg 142]

The actor laughed derisively. "A pasteboard crown," he cried, "so thinly covered with gold-leaf you dare not try to burnish it!"

"You do not mean that, Mr. Thrall!"

"I do mean it! A cheap and gaudy thing, the outside blazing with rare jewels, made of glass! Inside, paper, glue—a pasteboard crown! A thing worthless, meaningless!"

"No!" protested the girl; "your words are very cruel! I do not think you rightly judge the value of the Crown Dramatic, for even if it were but pasteboard it would not be worthless or meaningless! It would still be a sign, a symbol, of artistic triumph, of true excellence, of the world's approval!"

"You are obstinate," he declared.

"And you are not grateful to your profession, I'm afraid," she said, reproachfully; then she hurriedly added: "I beg your pardon! Of course you know of what you speak, and I am very presuming in my ignorance, but"—she clasped her hands tightly above the rose on her breast—"I long to wear that crown some day."

A few red petals fell from the rose and were caught in Thrall's hand. He glanced at Sybil's rapt young face—his resolve was taken. "You shall have your wish," he said. "I will place the crown upon your head; only promise not to reproach me when you find for yourself that it is only pasteboard!" [Pg 143]

CHAPTER XIII

THE FORMING OF THE CHRYSALIS

That Stewart Thrall wasted no time when once a plan was settled upon and a thing seriously undertaken may be gathered from a letter written in a Western city by the manager of a stock company playing a summer season in the theatre attached to a soldiers' home. The park coaxed people from the city, and the theatre then drew them from the park to the play.

This letter, having mentioned the safe arrival of certain manuscripts, scene-plots, and property-plots, continued:

> "And now about the young maid of high degree you sent us, with the valiant Jim Roberts acting as guard and henchman. And, to begin at the ending, like the Irishman I am, let me just tell you no better sheep-dog ever lived than this same James. He's kept as straight as a colonial front-door—honest, he has! If you could see the poor devil shake and quake for need of a few drops of 'mountain dew,' you'd believe me fast enough! He escorts her to and from the theatre and follows her like a secret-service man whenever she goes to the city of an errand. Of course, keeping straight to play sheep-dog leaves him all right as to memory too, and he hasn't lost a word since he's been here.

"Now as to the young damsel you want me to report on. She's all right and safe in the boarding-house my wife secured for her. She's a little too stiff and reserved and a great deal too pretty to be very thoroughly liked by the women. She started out very friendly and pleasant, but—well, you see, Lou Daskam and Dick Turner are engaged to each other, and George Jones and his wife Grace have only been married a few months, and their unrestrained endearments were somewhat confusing to her conservative mind. My wife explained matters to her; but though she now understands that the whole affair was a question of manners, not of morals, she remains a bit starchy toward the amorous four. [Pg 144]

"As to business—she's doing well. She's got *act* in her, *sure*! And Lord! what a face for the footlights! My wife's teaching her how to make-up, and when she's properly rouged and carmined and promaded, and that fleece of black hair loosened about her head, she's a cross between a princess and a gypsy, with the bearing of one and the coloring of the other. The audience has not disturbed her much. At my advice she looks at the people who are on the stage with her, instead of staring in front all the time. The thing that embarrassed her most was the tilt of the stage, which is very steep in this shop. That worried her a bit at first, but she walks quite naturally and unconsciously now. She is learning to gauge her voice to the house—by my rule. I send someone out in front, who stands at the back of the seats. When her scene is on, she glances at him. If he shifts about, or bends his head as if to hear better, she gently raises her voice or speaks with a little more force, until he stands still, hearing satisfactorily. She will soon be able to make the voice test in any theatre by watching for a moment or two some distant auditor.

"The greatest stumbling-block in her way is that, so far, she simply cannot talk while walking. She speaks her exit speech standing still, and then walks off in an awkward silence, or she walks to the door silently, then speaks her lines and *pops* off—making the house laugh.

"To-day Jim Roberts has taken her in hand, and out on the stage I can hear this going on: (Girl's voice) 'I will go' (Jim's voice, warningly: 'Step!') 'to my aunt's' (Jim: 'Step!') 'and say' ('Step!') 'I shall keep' ('Step!') 'my promise' ('Step!') 'to marry Harry!' ('Exit!!' shouts Jim.) 'Now, Miss Sybil, try it again, and say "step" to yourself this time. Pretty soon your feet will carry you along unconsciously.' [Pg 145]

"Now her voice, sounding very forlorn and unbelieving, begins: 'I will go (step) to my aunt's (step)——'

"It sounds awfully funny, but she's a persistent little devil, and she will hang on till she can make a decent exit.

"I'd like to bet something, old man, that I'm on to your game! You are not a man to put me into baby-farming like this for nothing. Well, good luck! She's bright and quick, and I'm crowding as much 'shop' into her head as I can on short notice. Jim Roberts has done a good deal in the way of teaching her technicalities. She understands all the entrance directions, the uppers and lowers and centres, etc.

"I believe that's all. Any further orders will be attended to. Thank you for the use of that play—it pulled us through in fine shape.

"Fraternally,
"J. A. Williamson."

By the same mail there had come a second letter from the theatre at the Soldiers' Home. It was written with woful shakiness showing in every spidery line, and with more than a spider's venom in its words. The envelope held, too, a folded ten-dollar note, which was a return for the like amount paid out by Thrall to a certain Mrs. Hoskins, who in her character of suspicious landlady had basely broken her promise "to wait a week," and had impudently presented her claim against Roberts to his manager—which was certainly an injurious proceeding and treacherous as well. Therefore the letter opened with some remarks about landladies, individual and in bulk, and though his style was a trifle florid and his spirit somewhat bitter, he nevertheless showed a thorough and discriminating knowledge of his subject, particularly where he pointed out the difference between a "she-shylock" and a harpy (Mrs. Hoskins was a harpy), the shylock being, he declared, ever satisfied with her single pound of flesh, while the harpy, beginning with your eyes, picks your every bone bare, and then tries to reach through your vitals. [Pg 146]

Having eased his bosom of much perilous stuff, he went on:

"Business is very good. The company is far better than you'd expect to see at the salaries paid, but every one's so devilish glad to get something to do in the summer that they are willing to work on half pay. Old Williamson's a first-class stage-manager—queer thing he never gets into New York, and he's taking so much pains with Miss Lawton, or Miss Sylvia Latimer, as you've got her billed here, that everyone is talking and wondering about it. But there's no mystery to me in this matter any longer. I went to her door yesterday to hand in a few pounds of mail from her people—they must all write every day of the week to her. She was not in the room, but the door was ajar, and I entered and placed the letters on the table. As I did so the wind fluttered open the leaves of a play-book—it was 'Romeo and

Juliet,' and the lines of Juliet were all pencil-marked for study. So that's the game, is it? That's why the girl is hidden under a stage-name, while she is learning her acting a-b-abs out here in the West? That's why I suddenly become of service to you? I am to guard this fruit from wicked little boys who may look over the orchard wall and spy it out? Oh, you think you are immeasurably deep, don't you? Well, you're not! But you're the damndest, luckiest beggar on earth! And you're smart—oh, yes, you're smart, where number one comes in!

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"What a card you have found! and how cleverly you will play it, and gather in the stakes—for yourself! Beautiful, talented, poor, and good—now! Don't give me your sneer, please! Even a drunkard knows an honest woman when he comes up with one. And this girl is a wonder! She is innocent, though she's not ignorant. Theoretically she knows of sin's existence—her stories, poems, and plays have all made her so monstrous wise; but, practically, she is as much of a child as was that other girl who came to you to learn to be an actress. Damn you! Oh, yes, I know this girl has gifts my sister Bess never had, but—purity is the subject now, and Sybil Lawton looks at you with precisely the same innocent, dauntless eyes that made my sister irresistible. Poor little maid! If it were not that she and the Missus, and even this last, your pet devil of a divorcée, were all such fair women, I'd think your sending me on here to guard this girl would have made me suspicious of another sort of game! See here, Thrall, don't you come any of your dam'd drooping-eyelid and lowered-voice effect over this girl! Leave her alone, if you know when you are well off. I know I've been your dog, your cur, but curs snap sometimes, and a silence, however long, may be broken. No, we don't want any Bessie in this! Stewart Thrall, manager—even Stewart Thrall, Romeo to the loveliest Juliet God ever made! But, don't you see how like she is to your victim, little Bessie, save in color of her hair and eyes? How like! For God's sake let that likeness protect— I—oh, my head's all gone to pieces! No, I'm not drunk! I'm queer for want of drink—but I dare not touch it while I have her to care for. I think if I met her eyes when I was 'off' I'd curl up like a worm that's stepped on!

"She—so gentle and so kind! And yet Herod could not touch her for pride! There, I've had a smoke; I'm steadier now. Yes, your find is a great one. When once she conquers her trouble over her exits she will be quite a decent actress. Her voice is clear and carries well. Hers is a genuine stage beauty too, lighting up radiantly. To your question—yes, she is easily coached. I've got rather a long part to break in, so I guess I'll go at it, after I mail this and get a bite. Watching others' preserves is hungry work. Tout à vous!—which I wish I wasn't!

[Pg 148]

"*Jim*."

"Confound him!" said Thrall, "I don't know when he is worst—crazy drunk or crazy sober! Why must he remind me of that resemblance? For, deuce take him, it does exist! It's not his drunken fancy, as I wish it were!"

He shivered in the warmth as he recalled the fair, childish face that used to beam with adoration upon him, unconscious avowal shining in each blue, honest eye. Shallow and inconsequent he had thought the little creature, and yet she had snapped the thread of life with her own hand rather than wait for its slow fraying under abandonment and separation from him. And Jim, by his silence and his craft combined, had averted an awful scandal.

He wiped his forehead and re-read the letter. Suddenly his face flushed. "The drivelling idiot!" he muttered. "I believe in my soul he's in love with this little Crown Princess, who yearns to be a Queen! If he dares to let her know of it I'll wring his neck! He's mighty brave on paper—threatening me, who has kept him out of the poor-house these five years! And my young affections are supposed to be strictly confined to 'the fair Ophelia' type, eh? I am to be blind to the fact that there's more beauty in this dark, lowering young face, more temptation in the upward curl of her swift smile, than could be found in the pink-and-white redundancy of the most perfect Rubens type alive! Oh, I am a fool to notice his rambling, maudlin nonsense! Let me keep to the business in hand. It's very evident that this girl has something in her, when tough old Williamson finds her promising and can see her beauty too. And this crazy wretch, Jim, who knows the requirements of a good actress as well as I do, says she's quite a decent actress now. All of which means that if she is let alone she will probably succeed only after years of struggle and hard work and many disappointments. Yet that is the natural, normal way to success. Perhaps I'd better leave her alone [surely, if Stewart Thrall ever had a guardian angel, its friendly whisper was in his ear at that moment]—leave her to work out her own artistic salvation? I—I could give her a start—I could use my influence to secure a good position somewhere for her first season. That would be the wise thing, Stewart, my boy! For there's no denying the girl's getting too strong a hold on my imagination. Yet what a furore it would create to spring this unknown, unheard-of beauty upon the public! What a vision she would be in the white satin lace and pearls of Juliet, with her young, dark, swift-changing face; and, as for acting the part, why—" A slow smile crept across his lips, unconsciously he drooped his heavily fringed eyelids, in the very way that Jim Roberts had cursed, and murmured: "I could teach her—I could teach her. This letter says she is easily coached. I could open the season with this new French play, holding 'The Duke's Motto' ready for revival in case the new play doesn't strike hard enough; and meantime I could either place my little Princess with old Mrs. Mordaunt for training, or—coach her myself, work the press to arouse curiosity, and by February at furthest spring my surprise—play my

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great card! The production will cost—but I'll gather it in again from the houses she will draw, if I bring her out as a star. I suppose I'd be wiser to drop this plan—but, oh, by Jove, I can't! I promised, fairly and squarely promised, she should have her crown. Poor little girl! I'd like to make the path to success easier to her than most people find it. Then, again, some cheap tuppenny-ha'penny actor may gather her up and marry her, out of hand, and so spoil all her future. Oh, devil take it! I'll toss a coin. No, I won't, either; that doesn't seem decent! But I'll wait for the next letter, and if she has learned by that time to make a correct exit, I'll bring her back here at the end of old Williamson's summer season, and begin coaching her on the quiet for the great coup! If she has not yet succeeded, I leave her to her own efforts. There, fate has it to manage now! I stand aside and wait!"

Seven days later this telegram reached Jim Roberts: "Bring Miss L—— on here at close. She can't go with Williamson for winter season. Train arrives late, so escort her to Riverdale first, then report to me at theatre.—Thrall." While in a certain paper's "Stage Gossip" there appeared:

> "The air of the Rialto is full of mystery just now. There are whispers of a society *débutante* who is to become a stage *débutante*. Sometimes she comes from the West with consenting friends; sometimes, being wealthy, she has defied the authority of lover and guardian alike and is openly preparing for a stage career. [Pg 151] The one thing that steadies the wavering rumor is that the name of the theatre to be favored by this shadowy society actress never changes—that part of the story is ever the same. Stewart Thrall is to be her manager and the Globe is to be the scene of her triumph. So much for the *on dit* of the Rialto. Perhaps Mr. Thrall will kindly rise and explain."

And a more staid and conservative paper stated: "That it was undoubtedly true that a young lady of birth and breeding, a member of one of New York's oldest families, was to be brought before the public as soon as the full consent of her family could be obtained, Mr. Stewart Thrall, with a most commendable sense of honor, refusing by his aid to place the beautiful suppliant in opposition to her natural guardians. The lady's name will only be given to the public when all opposition to her wishes have been withdrawn."

So the good angel had whispered his warning all in vain; and Thrall was already busy with glue-pot and paper and book of gold-leaf, for had he not promised, with the rose-petals that fell from her breast held red in his hand—had he not promised to crown the obstinate, ambitious girl who longed to be Queen of that fair domain, the Drama, who, while hoping to win fame herself, was "sorry that he had missed the way"? "God bless her!" he murmured, "God bless her!" and he made note of several new fables to give to the press anent the social débutante's private brougham, her lovers, her maids; for thus is the chrysalis formed from which, the dormant time being passed, the radiant butterfly will flutter forth to gladden the eyes of those whose curiosity has been cleverly aroused. Ah, yes! no chrysalis, no butterfly! [Pg 152]

CHAPTER XIV

THE RETURN FROM THE WEST

It was October already. The old White house stood and shivered when the wind came sharp from the steely river. Lena, making ineffectual war upon fallen leaves, could not even keep the porch free from them, and they skirled and whirled and gently slid and madly rushed, while in the house their movement could be distinctly heard like light pattering footsteps, ever seeking, never resting.

They even disturbed Lena's nerves. She looked about uneasily, while Dorothy laughed as they tied up each other's fingers, for they had been engaged in what Lena called "veather vending," and what Dorothy called "battening" the windows in her mother's room. For there was no question about it, the Lawtons had to face the winter right where they were. So Lena, with Dorothy's help, was doing her best to make a few rooms comfortable, and the hammering of nails and tacks had included thumb-nails as well. But what of that; their "veather vending" was turning lots of cold air from the rooms, and there was a comforting smell of freshly baked cookies coming from the kitchen, and great crimson and dappled branches of dogwood—Sybil's favorite autumn leaf—were over mantel and door, while dark purple and pale grayish lavender asters were [Pg 153] nodding from corner and vase. For joy! oh joy! Sybil was coming home from the West—that vague, chaotic place that had swallowed her sister, an outsider, and now cast her back a professional, a "for-true" actress, with three real newspaper notices of her work, though they had been won under an assumed name. Dear Syb! how proud they all were! Papa had split up a cigar-box and made a little frame for her very first newspaper notice and had it hanging in the corner by the window where he shaved.

And then, late that night, poor, pallid Jim Roberts had handed Sybil out of the shaky old hack at the White house door, and saying "Good-night," had turned to go, when grateful hands had drawn him inside, to receive courteous thanks from John Lawton and an explanation from Mrs. Lawton as to her present inability to send a comfortable carriage for her daughter and her escort.

"Oh, Mrs. Jones was Miss Lawton's escort quite as much as I was!" stammered Roberts. "I—I only

looked after the checks and things, and——"

"And," said Sybil, "hungry and tired, came away up here with me instead of going straight to your supper and your bed. And, papa, he had no overcoat with him, and he shivered dreadfully in the hack after the fearful heat of the car." Whereupon Dorothy insisted upon coffee being brought to him, and Sybil cried out: "I smell fresh cookies! Oh, Lena, bring some here!" Then, still in hat and gloves, she stood before him, saying: "You shall not miss the next train down. I will watch the time for you, so please drink your coffee and eat your cookies in peace!" [Pg 154]

"Cookies and coffee!" moaned Mrs. Lawton. "Barbarous combination! Mr. Roberts's dinner will be destroyed, or, to speak more correctly, his appetite will be destroyed. And while I'll not call it vulgar, still there is something so very domestic, so very intimate about a home-made cookie, that personally—no, my daughter, I could not have offered one to a stranger! Still I suppose we must expect these touches of bohemianism, now that you have become a professional actress!"

In the few moments that he sat there, Jim saw the poverty surrounding them. He could not help noticing the carpets and curtains, worn to the bone; the ancient and honorable furniture, the severity of the chairs; and yet the Lawtons were, temporarily at least, unconscious of it all. They were caught up in a golden glory of family love, of mutual admiration, of ineffable tenderness, and while all other eyes were turned with pride upon the dear wanderer returned, she, still timing him, still holding the plate of cookies, with an impulse that would not be denied, stretched out her free arm and drew her sister close to her side, gazing at her with an expression of love so protecting, so maternal, she might have been Dorrie's elder by ten years instead of two.

"Ah!" thought Roberts, "you'd be quick to suspect danger for her, and you'd be strong to protect; but to your own peril you'd be as blind as a young white owl facing the sun!" [Pg 155]

With almost a groan he sprang to his feet, a movement that wrung a disappointed "Ach!" from Lena, who, to the amusement of Dorothy and the fuming indignation of Mrs. Lawton, had been eagerly peering through the crack of the door, trying to get a good look at "Vun of dem Herr actin' mens, ven dey vasn't makin' no believes to nobody," and her betraying "Ach!" came with such a pony-like snort that even Mr. Lawton had joined in his daughters' laughter.

Then Sybil stepped close to Roberts and whispered, swiftly: "Will you be vexed if I ask you just to speak one word to our little German maid, who is the staff of the whole family, and whose manner is the only bad thing about her? Ah, you are good! [What would he not have done for Sybil's asking?] Dorrie, you call her. She wouldn't come for anyone else now."

"Lena! Lena!" called Dorothy's gay voice. "Lena! Quick, please!" And then, very, very red in the face, the sturdy, square little serving-woman stood in the doorway.

"We are in such a hurry, Lena," said Sybil, "because Mr. Roberts has to catch this next train; but, as he is the gentleman who brought me safe home after helping me to learn to act, I know you too want to thank him."

"Oh, ja! I doos so!" answered Lena, heartily, making her peasant-like bob of a courtesy.

But Jim Roberts went over to her, saying, with a laugh: "If there's any thanking to be done, I'm the one to do it; for, Mistress Lena, I haven't tasted cookies like yours since, as a bad boy, I came home at recess to hook them fresh and warm from my mother's pantry. Thank you, Lena!" [Pg 156]

As she backed smilingly out of the doorway, Sybil laughed: "You have saved her life by granting her a good look at that wondrous thing, a real, sure-enough actor!"

"Carefully edited and lavishly illustrated, this tale will doubtless reach her grandchildren," smiled John Lawton.

"Oh!" cried the girls, "hear papa making jokes!"

"You all seem to forget that you have an actress of your own in the family now for your little maid to feast her eyes upon," remarked Roberts.

"Oh!" exclaimed Sybil, flushing beautifully, "not yet. I am only 'a trying-to-be actress' yet! There, your time's up!" And she caught up his travelling cap and tossed it to him.

"Sybil!" remonstrated Mrs. Lawton, "Sybil! a little more decorum, even in the protecting presence of your family! Good-night, sir! In former days I should have sent you in my own brougham to the——"

But Mr. Lawton had swept the actor out of the room to a chorus of "Good-nights." On the porch, he said: "Mr. Roberts, I have some clippings from the papers about my little daughter's work. Can you tell me, for I am very ignorant of such things, whether those—er—those notices were inspired, or—you understand me, were they—er—commanded from the box-office, or at—er—a manager's suggestion, or were they unsought by anyone?" The old gentleman's voice trembled with eagerness and anxiety. [Pg 157]

"My dear sir," replied Roberts, "what may happen in that line in the future I dare not say, but as to the past, nothing was inspired. Those notices commending Miss Lawton's work were honestly earned, for she has natural gifts, neither is she afraid of work, and does not resent criticism—as yet."

Mr. Lawton took his hand and pressed it gratefully. "Thank you!" he said, "thank you, for your

goodness to my Sybil!"

Roberts flung himself into the old hack, muttering, as he slammed the door: "Hear him! Just hear him!" He burst into a laugh that ended in a groan. "Oh!" he continued, "I wonder if God, in some mighty shuffle of His worlds, has dropped this one out of His hands entirely! For surely nothing higher, nothing wiser than blind fate or a malicious devil can be guiding the affairs of man!"

He threw off his cap and held his head hard between his bony, long hands, and broke out again: "That gentle, helpless old fool, with his unmistakably aristocratic elbows nearly out of his sleeves, is the natural protector of two lovely daughters! How the devil will laugh when he takes note of the situation! If so weak a creature was to be trusted with daughters at all, they should for their own sakes have been plain girls, whose homeliness would have acted as a prohibitory tariff on folly of any kind! Again, the circling arms of some mothers would be as towers of strength for the [Pg 158] guarding of innocent beauty; but not this mother—this elegant 'has been,' who twists her memories of past wealth and power into thongs to lash her friends and family with! And, by Jove, the old rattle can carry herself well! She's been a fine-looking woman in her day—a fact she will never forget in this world, probably not in the next! But selfish? Lord! I'll bet her time is principally given to pulling out for her own use any plum of comfort to be found in their economical family pie! But they see nothing amiss! It's 'this chair for mamma!' One places a stool for her feet, and another brings a cushion for her back, and papa throws a scarf about her shoulders and lowers the light to suit her eyes; and when they have all made her quite comfortable, she rewards them with sighs and moans and tales of her former glory. But for family love commend me to this Lawton set. I never saw anything so beautiful in my life as the palpitating pride of that old gentleman in his daughters and their protecting love for him! And there it is. The natural position of father and child is reversed, and that lovely creature, Sybil, with father and mother both living, is as absolutely unprotected as any orphan on earth! Lord! How I wish I had a drink of whiskey! My nerves will jump clear through my skin before I get to the city! I wonder what Stewart would say if he knew I'd been travelling without a flask? Wouldn't believe it, I suppose. Gad! I've had heaven and hell pretty thoroughly well mixed together these last few weeks. Thrall gave me a bit of heaven when he sent me to act as sheep- [Pg 159] dog for this girl, and I ordered up a portion from the other place when I doomed myself to sobriety, out of consideration for her trust in me! Not a drop of anything to be had either at this infernal, suicidal station, and I've had nothing since Albany! Well, I must grin and bear it! I wish I hadn't to see Thrall to-night, and yet I want to know just what he's up to. Of course I'm dead sure he's going to coach this ambitious child for Juliet, but maybe he'll pass her over to old mother Mordaunt. She's clever and knows her business. Perhaps, too, he means to put young Fitzallen up for Romeo, and play Mercutio himself? May be! Ah, bah! May-bees don't fly at this time of year. I'd bet my bottom dollar—a coin always within easy reach—that he will coach her himself—yes, and play Romeo, too! But as I live by bread, Stewart, my boy, there must be no Bessie in this case, or something will happen—something that would have happened five years ago had I not been as completely under the spell of your fascination as ever she was, poor little maid! Hello, here we are, and the train coming, thank the Lord!"

Roberts hurried through the little waiting-room, past the small office, from which came the curt, short "tick-tick tack" that is as the voice of the ever-imperative telegraph wire, crossed the open space, tripping over the line of rails in the darkness, clambered up the steps, and entered the purgatorial heat of the car, made nauseating by the odor of banana and stale orange-peel, and dropped into a seat by the side of a sleeping man, only to spring up again when suddenly aware [Pg 160] that he had sat upon a bottle.

The movement aroused the sleeper, who, with his hat on the back of his head and a lock of hair clinging damply to his forehead, muttered apologies as he gathered up his overcoat out of the way. Having felt carefully in one of its outer pockets, he turned to Roberts with that loose smile of world-embracing geniality peculiar to the good-natured man who is "three sheets in the wind," and thickly remarked: "I's all right! Best kind of glass! I've sat on that flask dozen times myself 'nd never cracked it!" His head wobbled a moment, then he added, confidentially: "Soon's I can think—w-where in thunder I put cup—w-we'll have a drink together—like little men, eh? Why h-here it is, r-right in other pocket! Been a b-bear it might 'a' tore my g-gizzard out! Join me?"

Jim Roberts glanced a moment down the brilliantly lighted, well-filled car, then clenched his hands and, drawing a long, almost sobbing breath—declined.

"W-what's—w-what's reason you won't join me?" demanded the stranger, indignantly, yet showing at the same time a disposition to weep. "W-what have I done—say, now, w-what have I done? Slept with my m-mouth open, I s'pose? Slept out loud, too—very likely? But w-what of that? It isn't pretty, of course—but's no crime—eh?" He brought forth the metal cup and carefully wiped it out with a stubby forefinger, while he tearfully added that "the very dogs in the streets'd bark at him when they knew a gentleman had refused to drink with him!" [Pg 161]

And Roberts, with set jaws and feet twisting together, tried to control the leaping muscles and nerves that seemed to be crying out with a thousand gasping mouths for liquor! liquor! The tears of self-inflicted disappointment were stinging beneath his lids when there came to his ears, with infernal power to charm, the delicious "blub-blub-blub" of whiskey poured from a full bottle. He gave a gasp. In an instant his left hand held his hat before his face, his right hand grasped the cup and poured the contents straight and raw down his aching throat. The drink was followed by that convulsive shudder, so familiar to most drunkards. Heart shock someone has called it; but almost before he had returned the cup to its rejoicing owner a delicious warmth and comfort was

stealing over him, a sense of well-being made him tolerant even of the disjointed conversation of his chance acquaintance.

He reported presently at the private office of Manager Thrall, who received him eagerly and greeted him with unusual heartiness. The interview was long and confidential—very. When Jim Roberts finally reached his own room he had been drinking heavily and had been tramping the streets for hours. He was at his very worst. Flinging off only his hat and coat, he cast himself across the bed, and rolling his head face downward on his folded arms, he groaned: "I can't do anything! I'm less than a fly on the wheel! He's all right now—he means well—he honestly does! But, oh! good God! don't I know the man better than he knows himself! Don't I know that Stewart [Pg 162] Thrall is never more dangerous than when he means well?" and the poor wretch lay there and grovelled in helpless, drunken misery. [Pg 163]

CHAPTER XV

MRS. LAWTON LAYS PLANS

Before Sybil's trunks had been opened and her simple little home-coming gifts distributed, she knew that her sister, the patient, cheerful Dorothy, was being seriously worried by somebody or something, and she had not sat at the family table three times before she saw that her mother waged a secret, petty warfare against the young girl, who was really the mainspring that kept the whole family machinery in clock-work motion.

They had been so wholly united in their home-life that this surreptitious nagging, these swift side-glances that made sure John Lawton was out of ear-shot before the jeer or sneer or wounding innuendo was delivered, filled Sybil with amazement as well as hot anger.

"Poor little Dorrie!" she thought; "denied every pleasure that a young, healthy, pretty girl longs for! Skimping and saving, turning and cleaning and pressing, rarely going out dressed entirely in her own garments, never complaining, always smilingly winking back threatening tears, smoothing rough places, straightening out the tangles for others, and when the burden becomes too heavy, the cloud of small torments unendurable, instead of bursting into bitter railing or [Pg 164] furious tears as I do, Dorrie, with the absolute, unquestioning faith of a child, goes to her room and prays, asking that her burden be made lighter, or, if that may not be, that the blessed Lord will give her strength and patience and please make her understand what it is wisest for her to do in that special emergency! Poor little trusting ninny! As though God could trouble about her infinitesimal affairs! As though He would distinguish her faint appeal when once it had fluttered upward and been caught in that mighty whirlwind of a world's anguished prayer that, with a thousand times Niagara's sound, goes thundering to the Throne! Dear Dorrie! Such a patient little slave as she is to mamma, too! But I'll take a few hours from work and find out what is going on here—yes, even if I have to question Lena!"

She shook her head. "An indecorous and undignified proceeding that, but what else can I do? Poor papa never sees an inch beyond his handsome old nose! If it concerned anyone but mamma, Dorothy would tell me everything herself, for we have confided in each other ever since we had to 'make up' the secrets we shared. But she and papa always make a sort of fetish of mamma. It's strange, too," said Sybil to herself, "for mamma was very little to either of us, indeed, in the old days of luxury. As that English housemaid once said of us, 'we were little better nor horphans for all our finery and our sweets!' Mamma was always out, or going out, or just getting ready to go out. Or there were people staying with her, and we had to keep close to the nursery. We should [Pg 165] just have been servant-bred but for papa. Shall I ever forget his face the day he asked Dorrie some question, which she answered with a hearty, 'Bedad! I have then!' After he had read us a lecture on the subject of English as it should be used by intelligent and obedient little girls, Dorothy lifted her repentant, small countenance to be kissed, saying, 'Please forgive me, papa!' and he caught her up in his arms and said, 'Oh, baby girl, it is for you to forgive us—forgive us!' And when he was gone we talked and talked, and finally concluded that 'us' meant papa and Delia, because she was all the time saying 'bedad' and 'bad-cess,' and such words. That same night I heard mamma's voice, high and excited, from her dressing-room. She was saying, 'I really do *not* see why I am to be held responsible for the aimless chatter of children of *that* age. Of course, when they are older, and it's worth while, I shall impress myself upon them—shall take complete charge of—what? my mother? Never mind my mother! Times are changed, and really it's more than a trifle presumptuous for any Lawton to attempt to teach a Bassett how to—' and the voice became inaudible, because mamma had entered her sleeping-room and closed the door. But next day we took our drive with her, instead of the nurse or maid, and in our big feathered hats—I in pink and Dorrie in blue—we sat one on each side of her and swung our slim, black-silk legs against her skirts and wished papa was there. And that very day she cut Mr. Bulkley dead as he saluted her in passing, and said, under her breath, 'Horrid wretch!' Horrid wretch then! And [Pg 166] now? She can't be too cordial to him, actually pressing him to come again. Has she no eyes? Can't she see how he stares poor Dorrie out of countenance, and how—how—" Suddenly the girl started. "Why," she said, "it can't be! Oh, it can't be that she *does* see and understand and—and—

still welcomes him—that she is tormenting my little sister about *him*?"

A certain ominous tremble of the ceiling told of the energetic Lena's presence in the room above. Sybil flew up the stairs, went first to her trunk, and a moment later came to Lena, holding in her hand a spray of artificial flowers, and saying: "If you will bring me your hat I'll freshen it up with these velvet roses. I can do it right here while you are finishing mamma's room." With a cry of rapture the little, square-rigged German girl dropped the pillow she was holding between her teeth, while trying to introduce its further end into a fresh cover, and rushed from the room, to return in the twinkling of an eye with one of those forlornly tawdry hats, peculiar to the foreign servant. They always seemed to be trimmed with samples, boasting a pale spring blossom twisted with a dahlia or a few hips and haws of autumnal tinting, a bit of feather, always straight; a bit of lace, always cotton; a scrap of velvet, always dusty—the whole incongruity invariably suggesting the police station, no matter how respectable the wearer of the "mussy" confection may be. For a moment Lena looked frightened as Sybil's long fingers swiftly tore the rubbish apart; but a glance at the deep rich glow of color in the crushed velvet rose with the trail of bronzy-green [Pg 167] leaves reassured her, and she smiled the whole breadth of her honest moon-face as she exclaimed:

"Mein Gott! my Miss Lady! Dot mash-man will sure make me of der name of Miss Klippert, ven I make der Sunday valk, mit der roses on, youst like I com' by America! Ja! dot is too fine youst for Lena—all short! Dot make of me Miss Klippert—sure! you see now!" And full of excitement and happy anticipations, Lena rose like a hungry trout to Sybil's first cast, which was the remark: "I don't think Miss Dorothy is looking quite well?"

In her broken English the maid poured out the story of the trials and persecutions to which Dorothy had been subjected; of how her mother's selfishness in her imaginary illness had taxed the girl's strength; of how Leslie Galt had tried unsuccessfully to take Miss Dorrie for a drive, to bring the color back to her cheeks; of how Mrs. Lawton had changed her mind about the proprieties when Mr. Bulkley had driven up to the house with a similar object; and of a disgraceful scene at a near-by resort in which Mr. Bulkley and several "painted ladies" figured—a scene of which she and her "mash-man" were the witnesses.

The pitiful story finished, Sybil, controlling her feelings, went to the troubled Lena, set the newly trimmed hat on her head, gave her a little push toward the glass, and then fled to her own room, where, with blazing eyes and flushed cheeks, she paced the floor, repeating, over and over: "How dare he? How dare he force his attentions upon an innocent young girl? He is as vulgar as he is [Pg 168] wicked! His conduct is unpardonable—disgraceful! Oh, what can I do? How can I shield Dorrie, and where is Leslie Galt? I know he loves her, devotedly, but he can't have spoken yet, for she would have shared the secret with me within an hour of my coming! He's not a man to change, nor yet to hesitate without grave cause. Oh, I suppose it's poverty that commands his silence—poverty, fruitful mother of many miseries, of shame and humiliation! And yet—and yet," frowned Sybil, as she called up a mental picture of Leslie Galt, "he never looks like a poor man; and surely I ought to recognize any or all of the symptoms of indigence, know all the dear little earmarks made by straitened circumstances. And now that I think of it, his dress is perfect in its way, quiet, oh, yes, quiet enough, but such perfect cut and fit can scarcely belong to ready-made 'marked-downs.'"

And when had she ever seen spot or soil or sagging pocket, loose button, frayed binding, or faded tie? Her mother had called him "a salaried boy," but she recalled Lena's statement that he wished to take her sister to drive. She knew he often rode a horse, hired in Yonkers. He lavished gifts of fruit upon Mrs. Lawton and music and books and flowers on Dorrie. Surely, she thought, a young lawyer must receive a good salary to do all that and dress so well. She wondered if she ought to make him understand Dorothy's position. Even if they were only engaged, that engagement would protect the young fiancée from the detested approaches of another man. Papa? Ah! poor [Pg 169] dear papa had no authority where mamma was concerned! What should she do? Then suddenly she began to dress for the street. She decided that she would go to her god-mother with her trouble. She had always been fond of Dorothy, and if Mrs. Lawton feared any adverse opinion it was that of Mrs. Van Camp.

As she hurried down-stairs, hoping, by fast walking to the station, to catch the next train cityward, Mrs. Lawton came into the hall, to express shocked disapproval of her daughter's action and her sorrow at not having more fully impressed herself upon that daughter's mind and character, in which case she could have seen for herself the horrible impropriety of going to the city unaccompanied; in fact, to be perfectly explicit and exact, 'er *alone*! And Sybil, as she rapidly buttoned her gloves, replied with the humble deference of tone, which usually cloaked her worst impertinences: "Yes, mamma dear, undoubtedly the girl who can buy tickets for two and pay the salary of a chaperon who watches her, is guilty of a criminal impropriety in travelling alone. You see the point, don't you, dear mamma? Without wealth there is no impropriety. Of course that's unfair, but the fact remains that a poor girl may ride for an hour in a public car in broad daylight, and not only retain her self-respect, but fail to hear a single charge of impropriety. Of course it's hard, but since we have fallen upon poverty, we must not lay claim to the attributes of the wealthy. Good-by, dear mamma! Tell Dorrie and papa I shall probably have to see the costumer to-morrow, if Mr. Thrall can spare the time to accompany me, and decide upon correct designs; [Pg 170] but I shall be home in time for tea—D. V.—I mean of course."

As she flew down the steep driveway leading to the street, Mrs. Lawton, looking after her, said, aloud: "Dear me! With Sybil assuming this freedom of action and Dorothy developing a streak of

real obstinacy, I have to ask myself why I ever assumed the responsibility of bringing daughters into the worlds. Sons would doubtless have been far more satisfactory, particularly under the present unfortunate circumstances." And she returned to her rocker, her smelling-bottle, and her French novel, shaking her head and sighing portentously. [Pg 171]

CHAPTER XVI

A STRANGE BETROTHAL

Nothing of Dorothy's doing in all her young life had so exasperated Mrs. Lawton as her refusal to drive out with William Henry Bulkley. How, she asked herself, could a child of hers be so stupidly content in poverty and obscurity, when, by a little self-sacrifice, she could acquire wealth; then with beauty and wealth combined with the Bassett-Lawton finesse she could attain position and exist socially. With the slightest sense of her own value and an adroit touch of coquetry now and then, she could simply twist Mr. Bulkley about her little finger.

"Of course he is a bit old for her, indeed," admitted Mrs. Lawton to herself. "He is a trifle older than her father, but—but—love for me, a tender desire for my welfare, should outweigh that objection; and I have tried hard to make her understand that my worldly salvation depends wholly upon her conduct. And yet the stupid creature receives the rich man who has cast her his handkerchief with frightened silence or with prim monosyllables! I—I could shake her! In my days of affluence and power, I always raised my voice against corporal punishment for children; but live and learn, live and learn! I know now I was in error, for the other day when she hid [Pg 172] herself to avoid going to drive with William Henry Bulkley nothing would have given me more unalloyed pleasure than to have soundly trounced Miss Dorothy Lawton, my own youngest born daughter! If he only had an opportunity, no doubt Mr. Bulkley would flatter her vanity, arouse her ambition; but if he has no chance even to make splendid promises to her—well, he *shall* have a chance! She *shall* go out for a drive with him! Simpleton! She might herself have been driving a pair of dear little ponies this month past but for John Lawton's stiff-necked refusal to permit her to accept them. He's always ready to join hands with the girls in any sentimental folly. But I have a plan in my mind. The bird that can sing, but won't sing, my dear, must be made to sing! So next time Mr. Bulkley drives out here you will accept the seat beside him for at least a short drive, or I am not Letitia Lawton and your mother, Miss!"

While she was brooding over her plans in the sitting-room, Dorothy and Lena were busy in the kitchen, which was filled with the pleasant odor of baking bread. A large bottle of Lena's providing had been carefully covered with white flannel, and around and around it Dorothy was smoothly winding and basting down a bit of good old lace that was soiled beyond all using, and, as there was no money to spare for its renovation, she was taking this slow and tiresome way of cleaning it herself.

Lena, always delighted to do something for her favorite Miss Lady, was shaving some white soap up, ready for melting in a kettle of boiling water, and was earnestly assuring Miss Dorothy that [Pg 173] she would "get uf der hands scalded, uf she attempted to do dose jobs! Youst tell me, my Miss," she begged, "und I vill boil de bottle, or younce him up und down, or twist him round or vat you vant every hows, only don' you get of der hands scalted."

And just then, around at the front of the house, William Henry Bulkley drove to the door. Mrs. Lawton heard the approaching horse dashing through the sea of fallen leaves, and, springing from her chair, she hurried to the hall, opened the door a crack, and, with finger on lip, whispering: "Don't ring! wait a moment!" she closed it again upon the wondering visitor, who, nevertheless, obeyed, and stood there waiting.

Mrs. Lawton, with astonishing speed, ascended the stairs, entered her room, and taking a bottle from her dressing-table containing a mixture known to the whole family as "Mamma's drops," she swiftly poured the contents from the window, corked the bottle, and returned it empty to its place. She then seized a handkerchief, shook a few drops of camphor upon it, and, tying it about her head as she moved, hurried lightly on tiptoe down-stairs, and, opening the door again, whispering to Mr. Bulkley "Ring now!" she slipped into the sitting-room, and became instantly a stricken sufferer from violent sick headache.

As the bell jangled loudly in the kitchen it startled both occupants.

Lena made an exclamation, and Dorothy, starting out with: "Why, surely, it's too early for——," [Pg 174] stopped and flushed consciously, for she had that morning received a wee bit of a note from Leslie Galt, saying that he would be returning from the office earlier than usual that day and asking her permission to call, that he might speak to her on a very important subject—"a subject the enclosed might faintly hint at." And the enclosed being a violet, had "hinted" so sweetly that a sort of blissful misery of anticipation had been thrilling her nerves and flushing and paling her cheeks all the day. Now, as Lena left the kitchen, she glanced into the bit of broken looking-glass the little German maid had tacked on the wall for guidance in her own Sunday prinking, and, with tremulous fingers, was training the fluffy curls on her brow in the way they should go, when Lena returned with the heavy dragoon's men stride that anger always engendered in her, announcing, sullenly: "It's dot Herr Bergamots man, miss"—a name she had given Mr. Bulkley on account of

the perfumes he used so lavishly—"und smellin' like a whole drug-store turned outside der door!"

"Oh!" gasped poor Dorothy in dismay, for she instantly realized that if his ponderous loitering was as long as usual poor Leslie Galt would find no opportunity to discuss that important subject with her that day. With a fallen countenance she was turning toward the door, when Lena added: "Und miss, der Mistress Mudder, she say you shall first com' quick right away by her, in der sittin'-rooms, where she make almost to die by der sick stomach head!"

"What!" exclaimed Dorothy, "mamma sick—why, since when?" Then anxiously: "Had she not her lunch and tea as usual, Lena?" [Pg 175]

"Ja! she had, und she eat like a soldier!" scornfully asserted that handmaiden. "Und den sit mit der feet on der cushions und der plate full of der Herr Galt's grapes on der knee, und eat und tell me, vile I clear der tray avay, how hard is der life by her now! Und how hard for her to have der children mit ungrateful teeth not so sharp as der serpents! Und now she com' all tied up by der head und all crazy like by der pains, und vant you quick pefore even you go to der parlor to see der Herr Bulkley!"

"Oh!" cried Dorothy, "get a glass and spoon quick, for mamma will want her 'drops' the very first thing!"

As she hurried to the sitting-room she wondered why on earth her mother had not called or rang the bell, as was her custom when she was not feeling well. Entering the room she asked: "What can I do for you, mamma, and what has made you ill so suddenly?"

"Anxiety for the future of my family and the unhappiness of being a disobeyed, unloved mother has made me ill!" answered the sufferer. "I am of a very sensitive and delicate temperament; I have borne the neglect of the world in patience; I have suffered for the ordinary comforts of life without a murmur."

"Oh, mamma!" deprecatingly interjected Dorothy.

"Hold your tongue, miss!" snapped Mrs. Lawton. "You know, as well as I do, I have not had a silk stocking to my leg for years, and I have borne it all, and lived on, some way! But when my own flesh and blood flout me, and coldly deny me a little comfort for my last days, my courage breaks, [Pg 176] and sickness supervenes—'er—'er, perhaps I mean intervenes. I—'er—'er, well, anyway—oh, dear heaven! help me, someone! My drops! my drops!" She rolled her head frantically about and called louder and louder for "drops."

Dorothy ran out, but, Mr. Bulkley stopping her in the hall, she took glass and spoon from Lena, and told her to run upstairs for mamma's drops-bottle (Mrs. Lawton smiled as she heard), and then explained that a sudden headache had attacked her mother, but her drops would relieve her and produce sleep.

"Hum! Opium, I should think!" remarked Mr. Bulkley.

"Oh, I hope not!" said Dorothy, and held out her hand for the bottle Lena had brought, and lo! it was empty.

"Did you spill it?" she asked, in a frightened voice.

"Nein! I huf not spilled nottings, my Miss Lady!" said Lena, shortly. "And my bread com' burn uf I don't go back by der kitchen!"

"O—o—h! o—o—h!" groaned Mrs. Lawton. "Where are my drops? What's that? *All* gone? Not even *one* dose? Well, I shall die without it! I simply can't bear this pain!"

She shot a meaning glance at Mr. Bulkley, who caught the cue, and exclaimed: "My poor dear friend! If this remedy can be had at Yonkers, and Miss Dorothy will direct me, I will go at once and procure these precious drops!"

A distressed, a harried look came into the girl's face. "Mamma," she said, "Sybil will go and I'll [Pg 177] stay by you."

"Sybil's in New York by this time!" answered Mrs. Lawton. "I have been too ill to be able to tell you before! So, hurry your hat on and start at once!"

"Dear mamma, Lena can get the drops—she knows where the store is—and then we need not trouble Mr. Bulkley."

"No trouble!—no trouble at all!" pompously declared that gentleman.

"Lena has an oven full of bread to watch!" snapped the suffering one, whose head seemed surprisingly clear, by spells, at least.

"Then," despairingly cried Dorothy, "I will run for it myself! I can go very quickly, mamma, and perhaps Mr. Bulkley will be so good as to keep you company till I return!"

"Dorothy," cried Mrs. Lawton, "are you so utterly heartless that you can deliberately lengthen out this period of suffering, simply to gratify some whim of your own? O—o—o—h!" she groaned, dismally.

While Mr. Bulkley remonstrated: "Really, now, my dear little girl, while we have no right to—er—

er, to expect logic from a lovely creature like yourself—you'll pardon me, Miss Dorrie, but you really don't show your usual good sense in this instance! It is quite absurd, your idea of walking when you can reach the village and return in less than a third of the time by driving, and—and you know the poor lady's comfort should be our first thought, so toss on your hat and let us start at once!" [Pg 178]

With a lump big and hard in her throat the girl turned and left the room, and half way up the stairs she was almost sure that she heard a low laugh from the room she had left. "Oh," she thought, "if only papa was back from his long walk, or if my Syb were here! How I wish Leslie had arrived before this dreadful old man, who quite wears himself out pretending to be a young man! Oh, dear! oh, dear! if Leslie should happen to see me out with Mr. Bulkley—on the very day he was to call! Oh, mamma, mamma! you are not playing fair!" and she dried two big tears from her eyes before pulling down her veil, and then, all ungloved, she ran down, and scrambling unassisted—to Mr. Bulkley's annoyance—into the trap, sat there clutching the empty bottle, whose various labels told plainly of visits to more than one chemist's shop, and so overheard, though imperfectly, the groom making some suggestion about the horse, "the chin-strap (mumble, mumble), curb, pretty severe (mumble, mumble), tender mouth."

Mr. Bulkley's domineering tones answered: "Let it alone, I tell you! I know what I'm about! I don't want my arms pulled out! Stay here till I come back!" And, without the comforting presence of even a groom, they started toward Yonkers.

The mounted police of those days found little to do on Broadway, and even less on the quiet length and breadth of Riverdale Avenue, and many of them, from very weariness and ennui, made pets of their horses, sometimes teaching them simple tricks. Most of the men walked a good deal, and, with bridles hanging loosely over their arms, allowed the horses to browse the grass at the [Pg 179] roadside. But one man had fallen into the habit of leaving his horse entirely free, to follow him like a dog. This animal was the big black, whose swollen leg Mr. Lawton had been interested in, in the spring. His name was Napoleon. He had been on the force for years, and was famous for his speed in short dashes. He had become well acquainted with the Lawtons, and would beg from the girls in the most barefaced manner whenever he met them; while he had established apron-nibbling relations with Lena, who talked much to the policeman of her "mash-man," who was his friend, while Napoleon meditatively sampled the gingham she wore.

Sometimes, while the officer gossiped, the horse would be a third of a block and more away, climbing an embankment, or reaching into some hollow after an enticing bit of dandelion or clover clump; and though he answered to a whistle, as a dog would, Sybil had several times remarked that some day an interesting moment would arrive for that policeman, that some sudden call would come for his services, and before the sundered man and horse could be united time would be lost and trouble would accrue—for the man, at least. But October had arrived, and her prophecy was as yet unfulfilled.

As Mr. Bulkley drove out of the old White house gateway the most unobservant person must have noticed that the big chestnut gelding was either in great discomfort or in a very bad temper. Dorothy was surprised, too, to see Mr. Bulkley trying to pull the animal, who wanted to go, down [Pg 180] to a walk, and, finally, in a burst of temper, sawing the poor brute's mouth so cruelly that Dorothy, with a cry of pity, caught at Mr. Bulkley's wrist with her ungloved hand, saying: "Please, oh, please, don't do that, it hurts him so! See, there's a streak of blood on the foam of his mouth!"

And, at that unconscious touch, William Henry Bulkley, with the red of his cheek spreading over brow and neck, turned avid eyes upon her, saying thickly that "that little hand of hers had power to guide him where it would," adding, with brutal coarseness, that he "would crush the horse's jaw, like a nutshell, to spare her annoyance!" a speech that was a trifle wide of the mark, since he, and not the horse, had hurt and frightened her.

"Mr. Bulkley," said Dorothy, "won't you please let him go on a little faster? Mamma will find the time very long!"

And her companion laughed aloud, as, with ill-considered frankness, he made answer: "Oh, I guess mamma's all right!" Then he traitorously added: "She's being treated vicariously. The drive *you* take will cure *her* headache!" laughing immoderately.

"I do not understand you," said Dorothy, coldly.

"Oh, my little girl!" he gurgled; "my little girl, whims in the young and beautiful are not only pardonable, they are adorable. They should be obeyed without hesitation, but the whims of the elderly are ridiculous. My friend Mrs. Lawton has whims, and that headache of hers will be helped quite as readily by a little quiet as by these wonderful drops. This is a lovely day for the [Pg 181] view from Park Hill, and we'll just drive up there and enjoy it!"

"Mr. Bulkley," broke in the distressed and angry girl, "I must insist upon getting mamma's medicine and returning at once!"

And just then, through a side street leading to Broadway, came Leslie Galt, tall, well set up, well-dressed, some law books under his arm, and in his face all the pride and bright hopefulness that belong by natural right to the face of the man who goes to seek his love and ask her promise. He recognized the big chestnut as it passed his corner, and also he knew but too well who was the wearer of the white-winged, blue-veiled hat, and his heart sank like lead in his breast in bitter disappointment. He stood a moment at the corner, then, instead of turning down Broadway

toward Woodsedge, he followed up the street in the direction taken by the slowly moving carriage.

Dorothy had not seen him, but, instead, caught a glimpse of old black Napoleon, half-way up a bank, after a bunch of late clover blooms peeping out invitingly from the fallen leaves, while his uniformed master, a third of a block away, conversed gallantly with a sturdy young blowzy-belle of his own nationality. And even as Sybil's prophecy came into her mind, she noted a small store on her left with red and blue bottle-filled windows and stands of soda-water and cod-liver oil signs outside, and she eagerly cried: "Stop, please! Here's a drug-store!"

"But," grumbled Mr. Bulkley, "I thought we were going up into the town? This is not the place you intended going to?" [Pg 182]

"Oh, any drug-store will answer," insisted the girl; "the drops are not difficult to prepare."

And with an angry jerk her vexed companion pulled the fretting horse in close to the sidewalk and stopped. But as Dorothy, bottle in hand, rose, the animal started, throwing her back into her seat, and Mr. Bulkley's loud "whoa!" and violent jerk on the tormented mouth did not add much to his steadiness in standing. For again, yes, and a third time, was Dorothy's effort to descend frustrated by the irritable, nervous starting of the chestnut.

And then Mr. Bulkley's always feeble hold upon his temper gave way entirely, and, snatching the bottle from the girl's hand, he violently exclaimed: "Good God! Let *me* get out! Here!" and he flung the reins into her lap and sprang out of the trap. Answering her startled cry with "I won't be more than a moment" he started across the walk to the store.

And sometimes more than one would be superfluous, for some moments are crowded with incident; this was one of them. In the same instant that followed the sudden lessening of the strain upon the horse's mouth there had come Dorrie's startled cry and the sharp bang of the store door, violently slammed by Mr. Bulkley, each causing a leap of the chestnut's every nerve, and followed by the swift response of a raked up pile of leaves to some impish current of air that sent them in swirling circle out into the street, where, whirling down the hill like a veritable dancing Dervish of the Dust, they passed fair between the horse's legs! A bound, a long, wild scream from Dorothy, and the chestnut was off, with the trap slewing this way and that from side to side! [Pg 183]

That cry had reached Galt's ears, and it almost stopped the beating of his heart for a hideous moment. Then, hurling the books he carried to the ground, he started on a run, when suddenly he heard the shrill, long whistle of the policeman recalling his horse, and glancing behind him he saw the officer racing toward him. Right in front came the big, black Napoleon, obediently answering his master's call. With a single bound Galt was at the horse's side, had grabbed the bridle with one hand, the pommel with the other, and hurling himself into the saddle, pelted by a very hail of furious oaths and threats to shoot, he gave the good old black the heel and a chance once more to prove his vaunted speed, for the runaway was now a race between the chestnut and the black!

And all the time, this frantic lover on his illegal mount, though praying dumbly for the safety of his love, was, all unconsciously, swearing like a madman. The policeman followed until his breath was gone, and, pausing an instant to regain it, he saw a boy come from a side street, who was exercising a livery horse. Before the half of Jack Robinson could have been said the policeman had the boy by the leg, down, and himself striding the horse, and pelted madly off in wild pursuit —and the race became a hunt.

At sight of the girl in the swaying, swinging vehicle, people racing along the sidewalks cried out in pity. Drivers turned out to give free passage to the furious horse. And Dorothy, who, white-faced, staring straight ahead, had gasped once or twice, "Sybbie! oh, Sybbie!" feeling faintness stealing over her, could only hope it might come before the inevitable crash. [Pg 184]

And then she was dimly conscious of regularly beating hoofs behind her. Something dark showed close at her side, fell back, reappeared, seemed stationary for a moment, then rushed ahead, and she recognized Napoleon, and wondered vaguely why his rider wore no uniform.

The old horse knew his business well. He had avoided the wheels, but now crowded in close upon the runaway. Galt reached for and caught the bridle; the chestnut swerved to the sidewalk; then a tree, a high curb, cramped wheels, sudden splintering of a shaft, and the high cart was over, and Dorothy, hurled half-way across the street, fell on one doubled-up arm and lay silent and motionless.

The crowd that so miraculously appears upon the scene of even a suburban accident, was closing about her, when, leaving the horses to the care or the neglect of others, Leslie Galt dropped on one knee, and lifting the pallid face, whose left side, dust-smeared, bruised, and sand-cut, was so piteous a sight to him, in breathless, unthinking haste, cried: "Dorothy! my darling! For God's sake, speak to me!"

And even as the words left his lips he remembered his situation, but it was too late. He caught the exchanged glances, the half-wink, half-leer on the face of a hulking fellow, and, like a flash, boldly lied to protect the helpless girl, saying: "Run for a doctor, someone, please! This is my affianced wife, Miss Lawton, and I dare not think of leaving her!" [Pg 185]

The effect of that statement was instantaneous. Murmurs of sympathy were heard, women

pressed closer. One drew the tossed skirt smooth about the girl's ankles; another produced a smelling bottle from her chatelaine; a third gently strove to straighten that crumpled looking arm; while the leering fellow went plunging diagonally across the street to call out a doctor residing near. Galt had barely time to feel a pang of terror over his headlong assertion, an awful fear that Dorothy might repudiate his claim, when the furious policeman came pounding up, threatening unspeakable and dire punishment for this disturber of the peace, this breaker of the law, and—and horse-thief, and demanding that he submit at once to arrest.

"All right," answered Galt. "As an officer you have every right to hale me to prison; and yet, as a man, I'm sure you will make some allowance for a fellow who sees his future wife in danger! For," desperately thought Leslie, "I may as well hang for a sheep as a lamb, and stick now to my claim."

Then, with a glint in his eye, he added, innocently: "I know you are anxious not only to lock me up, officer, but to get the opportunity to explain to your superiors how you and your horse came to be so widely separated while you were on duty?"

The policeman's jaw dropped a bit. He looked distinctly troubled. A lady came out just then and [Pg 186] asked that the injured girl be brought into her house, and, as the policeman stooped to help Leslie lift her, he exclaimed: "God be good to us! Wh-y it's Miss Dorothy Lawton! Won't there be ructions when the old man at home hears of this! Them girls are just his two eyes! What's that? Will I be leavin' you free of arrist till the doctor comes? What kind of a bounder do you take me for, anyway? I'll leave you free till you'll be gettin' the little colleen safe home, sure, and thin maybe you'll show up and stand for a fine and the like? Divil take that gang out there!" and out he charged upon the crowd.

Finding himself for a few precious moments alone with Dorothy, who was lying on a settle in a hall, Galt began a hurried search of his breast-pocket. He brought out a small box, and, opening it, was shaking out into his palm a glittering ring, when a faint moan reached his ear, and, bending over, he saw the blue eyes he loved slowly open, saw the dazed look passing, and as glad recognition dawned in them he swiftly took her hand, and slipping the ring upon her finger, he whispered, rapidly, urgently: "Little Dorothy, listen! Try to understand! And oh, try, too, to forgive me! But you are hurt, dear, and that I may have the right to protect and care for you, I—I—oh, Dorrie, see, dear!" He lifted her hand that she might see the ring. "I have dared to claim you, sweet—have declared you my promised wife! For God's sake, don't deny me! Promise!" [Pg 187]

But Dorothy promised nothing. The faint blush that had crept into her cheek died there. The wide-amazed eyes slowly closed, and in utter silence she slipped back into the unconsciousness in which the doctor presently found her. [Pg 188]

CHAPTER XVII

THE COSTUMING OF JULIET

While Dorothy was taking prominent and uncomfortable part in that impromptu "Wild West" show on Broadway, in picturesque and hilly Yonkers, Sybil, in New York, sat in Mrs. Van Camp's old-timey drawing-room and fairly astounded her hostess by confiding to her Mrs. Lawton's evident desire to marry Dorrie to William Henry Bulkley.

"Has Letitia gone stark, staring mad?" she exclaimed. "Why, the man is the merest nobody, who could no more name his grandfather than he could fly! Money he has—yes, of course! But money without family can't balance the public flaunting of all his coarse amours, his bad manners, and worse temper! She must perfectly remember, too, the life he led his poor wife—who was, by the way, a member of the Massachusetts Stone family. Why, her great-uncle was a judge, and her second cousin was lieutenant-governor of the State. How she ever came to accept young Bulkley is a mystery. But she paid for her folly, poor thing. However, I shall take it upon myself to inform Letitia Lawton of some of the atrocities of his recent years, and tell her that as his wife Dorothy would be as dead socially as if she were over in Greenwood." [Pg 189]

"Oh, don't!" shivered Sybil, "dear god-mamma! I hope I may go to Greenwood before my little sister Dorrie does!"

And Mrs. Van Camp pushed the girl's dark hair back with a caressing touch and said: "How devoted you two girls are to each other! You might be twins. Even as children I never knew you to squabble or sulk. You, Sybbie, had a furious temper, but your rages were almost always in defence of Dorothy. Do you remember how you kicked the shins of the gardener once because he had kicked her dog?"

"Yes!" laughed Sybil, "and scratched and bit a boy-tramp who attempted to snatch her little locket from her neck. But I can't help loving her, for she's the bravest, sweetest, jolliest, prettiest sister a girl ever had, and she's all the world to me!"

And Mrs. Van Camp, laughing a little at her enthusiasm, held up a finger and said, "Wait!"

And a bit later Sybil was on her way to the theatre, where Mr. Thrall joined her, and together

they walked to a house on Fourth Avenue, where Sybil was presented to an ancient couple, who in the profession were recognized as authorities on the subject of correct historic costuming.

Never had the girl received a greater surprise. She had expected a stately and dignified presence, and certainly the sumptuous entourage of a very fashionable dressmaker. But here there was no reception-room, no parlor, no fitting-room, no boy in buttons. Here the thing that first commanded attention and longest held it was the almost overpowering odor of garlic. It led [Pg 190] them through the little drab hallway, up the stairs, and to the door of the stuffy and crowded living room, where an old woman in a false front and a black alpaca dress and a snuffy old man in carpet slippers received them.

And, as they heartily greeted the manager, Sybil wondered what on earth there could be in common between the rich and splendid dresses she had seen at the theatre and these frumpish old people, while she shuddered at the thought of their stumpy, uncared-for hands, pulling about beautiful satins and velvets. "But of course," she thought, "they have people under them who do the real work." Afterward she knew that it was the cunning of these same fingers that produced all the wonderful embroideries in bullion and spangles that are so difficult to obtain in this country.

Now, however, she saw that Mr. Thrall treated the couple most deferentially. Indeed, he was secretly anxious to see what impression his "Princess," as he mentally called Sybil, would make upon the old pair, who had dressed every famous Juliet of the past twenty years, and who were in their own way veritable artists.

He had come there with one or two fixed ideas on the subject in hand, and he hoped there might not be a struggle with the old pair, whose obstinacy he well knew. But he had a vision of Sybil with cloudy, dark hair, all netted over with pearls, after the Venetian fashion, with pearl-encircled neck and arms, and pearl-engirdled waist; and he was determined that she should not wear glittering ornaments of any kind—which he rather fancied they would favor—or much gold [Pg 191] and general splendor, after the style in which they had clothed the Juliet of his previous season. For he forgot how well these old people knew their business, or perhaps he did not know the passionate love of beauty that produced in them an almost poetic power of expression, through color, fabrics, draperies. They were like artists, who got their "darks" from heavy velvets, "middle tints" from cloths and satins, and their "highest lights" from laces and jewels.

Sybil, hatted and veiled and jacketted, had remained in the background, a position that gave her a glimpse of another room, shelved about from floor to ceiling, with every shelf quite crowded with green boxes. She had been so interested in her surroundings that she had not heeded the conversation going on until the strong disapproval on both old faces drew her attention to the words "society" and "débutante"; and when, to a question, Mr. Thrall answered, "Juliet," they gazed at him with incredulous wonder for a moment. Then, exchanging glances of contemptuous derision that made poor Sybil's cheeks burn, with innumerable shrugs and much sniffing they scuffled back and forth, bringing out and throwing open boxes, until the room was presently a confusion of such splendid materials as velvets, satins, crêpes, of silver tissues and cloth of gold; while camphor gum and cedar wood sent odors from the boxes holding rare furs, cut into strips of trimming width, correct for king or prince, for judge or queen. For in this cramped and shabby place one could be provided with everything, from the rough woolens and leathers of Macbeth, the black and purple satins, the jet and sable of Hamlet, the crimson velvets and ermine of [Pg 192] queens, the embroideries and laced fripperies of white-wigged courtiers, down to the floating gauze of a Titania and the silvered wings of a cupid.

In the splendor of the display Sybil forgot her recent mortification, and thrilled with delight at the thought that some portion of it was to be placed at her service—for her adornment!

As the old man came lumbering in with two great volumes, bearing the title "Modes et Costumes Historique—Étranger," and, slamming them down on the table, began ostentatiously turning over the colored plates, Thrall, laughing good-naturedly, closed the book, saying: "Now, now, Lefebvre! You and Nonna Angelique here need no plates to dress Shakspere's people by, and you won't be so cross when you *see* your new Juliet! Come now, Madame, no one knows better than you do how important is the setting of a jewel! Oh, I know what that shrug means and that 'la, la, la!' But as a just woman you must at least see my young Capulet before you condemn her. Miss Lawton," he continued, "please remove your jacket. Thanks! And now take off your veil and hat, please!"

The autumn wind had somewhat roughened Sybil's hair, and she raised her hands to smooth it, but he stopped her: "Not for the world!" he said, laughingly. Then he took her by the hand and led her to the centre of the room, saying:

"Monsieur et Madame, you will kindly costume this young girl for me, but only *if* you can see in her a Juliet. If not, why—" he stopped. [Pg 193]

Flushed, excited, embarrassed under deliberate inspection, Sybil stood with downcast eyes and red, half-sullen lip, already quivering to a smile.

The old pair stood at gaze. Then mutely the woman's hand went out and was caught in his.

The girl saw, and with her sudden flashing smile, she raised imploring, dark eyes and looked at them.

"Par Dieu!" cried old Lefebvre, "'tis Juliet's self!"

"And oh, mon Dieu! mon Dieu!" the old woman exclaimed, "if you can act as you can look the part! Oh, Mr. Thrall, I crave your pardon! Will I costume her?—*will I?* We shall make of her that last blossom of the House of Capulet—the very Juliet herself!" She turned and half whispered to the old man, "Slight and dark!"

He took snuff furiously, and added: "Rich colored, quick tempered, hot!"

And then, together: "Let's see! let's see!" and they turned excitedly toward their boxes.

"No velvet, I think?" suggested Thrall, who was highly elated that his judgment, so far, had been so heartily seconded by this experienced old couple.

"Velvet? Bah!" responded Nonna Angelique, with a condemnatory wave of the hand that swept velvet entirely out of consideration. "Too old! too heavy! but—but—" She tossed things right and left in hurried, nervous search.—"Where's that blond lace scarf?" she fretted, "where?—where? And why don't you open the cabinet, and not stand there wasting time, mon mari?" [Pg 194]

As they stood waiting, Stewart Thrall said, laughingly: "Patience, patience! We are in the hands of the powers that be. These are the people who 'paint the lily' and—er—er—touch up refined gold! And, Miss Lawton, haven't you been about a theatre long enough to learn how indiscreet it is to laugh at your manager's imperfect quotations? You should reserve your merriment for those occasions when he tells a supposedly funny story. Ah! ah! the lost is found!"

For Nonna Angelique came trotting up with a long scarf of silky old blond lace trailing from her hands, and Sybil, turning toward her, gave a cry of rapture. Drawer, too, after drawer had been drawn out from the chiffonier, and from their velvet-lined depths there came a blaze and glow and gleam and such dancing prismatic colors of violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, red, from jewels in such good and careful setting that, imitation though they were, they commanded admiration even in broad daylight.

Among these crowns and crosses, stomachers and necklaces, there were minutely exact copies of some famous originals treasured in the museums of Europe. Nor were these ornaments cheap; the price of many of them was told in hundreds of dollars, not tens. And Sybil, while missing their real value, which lay in their historical accuracy, might well be forgiven for her childish delight in their meretricious splendor.

"Oh, how I wish Dorrie could see, too!" she exclaimed, and the snuffy old man nudged his rumpled old wife with his elbow, and, looking at Sybil's flushed and happy young face, they [Pg 195] wagged their heads knowingly.

And Stewart Thrall said to himself: "To watch her countenance is like watching the surface of a land-locked lake—one moment glass-smooth beneath the sun, then reflecting a slow white cloud, then breaking into ripples, fretting into waves and blackening to sudden storm! Ah, surely you are the headlong Capulet in love with love!" and his meditation broke off short.

Lefebvre was advancing, diamond coronet in hand, and he anxiously waited results. Nonna Angelique, with stumpy brown fingers, had still further loosened Sybil's black hair and fluffed it out, crooning to herself the while, and had turned her head this way and that, bent it down, lifted it, then put her hand out for the coronet her husband brought, placed it, drew back a step, then tore it off to a chorus of, "o! no!"

"Too old!" said Lefebvre.

"C'est cela! too old!" nodded Nonna Angelique.

"Too old!" acquiesced Thrall.

Then was handed over a golden net, studded with jewels; and oh, Sybil did hope they would let her wear that!

Old Angelique put it on with deft hands. "Mais comme elle est belle!" she exclaimed; "but——"

Thrall shook his head and repeated: "Beautiful, but——"

And the old man explained the "buts" fully with the remark: "Too Zingary, n'est ce pas?"

"Yes! yes!" cried Nonna, throwing her arms over her head and snapping her fingers to imitate [Pg 196] castanets. "Oui! oui! too Zingary—too gypsy-like!" and off came the golden net.

A head-piece of colored stones barely touched her brow when, with a contemptuous "Bah! too Egyptian" it was returned to the drawer.

The costumers stood looking at each other, silently. Thrall waited; he wanted them to propose pearls themselves, and thus avoid a wrangle, for they did not accept suggestions willingly. Then, suddenly, Nonna Angelique said: "Let me hear the voice, Mr. Thrall. Give her a cue; let me know whether her voice matches the mobilité of her face. That may give me my idée!"

Sybil gave a frightened, deprecating, "Oh, Mr. Thrall!"

But he answered with: "Steady! steady!" then added: "Give her 'Wherefore art thou Romeo?'"

She looked at him with dilating eyes, then clasped her hands, and gazing into space, obediently began:

"Oh, Romeo! Romeo! wherefore art thou, Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name—
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn—my—love!
And [with a rush] I'll no longer be a Capulet!"

Nonna Angelique caught the girl's face between her hands and kissed her soundingly. It had been an unexpected test, and Thrall, pleased at her courage and obedience, was simply delighted with the effect she got from that pause, as if at her own temerity in using the words:

"... be but sworn—*my* love!"

[Pg 197]

and then the reckless dash of the declaration:

"... I'll no longer be a Capulet!"

And Sybil, glancing up, noted for the very first time the extreme beauty of the man's eyes, and if the open admiration beaming from their sapphire depths gave her a thrill of gratification, it was the approval of the manager that moved her, not the man, she told herself; and since there is no one in this world so easy to deceive as one's self, she undoubtedly believed her own statement.

"Ah! ah! monsieur, you have a find in this young girl!" said old Lefebvre to Thrall. "She should be a big card—and in your hands, eh?" he poked the managerial ribs and winked his round black eye knowingly. "The wires will be pulled, eh? And the public, it will dance! And the dollars they will rattle, eh? A-a-ah! Qu'est-ce, cherie? Les perles? mais oui—certainement! In a moment I shall bring them! My key? Ah, the devil flies away with everything this day! Where is my key? Ah, here in my vest-pocket all the time!"

And at last Thrall's patience was rewarded as pearls came to the front, and "Oh!" exclaimed Sybil, in amazed delight. For her idea of imitation pearls had been founded upon the cheap bluish-white glass beads with just a skim of wax for lining. Now she stood astonished by the weight and lustre of these lovely things from Paris, where by some clever artifice the scales of fish are used to produce upon the forms of almost solid wax the wonderful "nacre" of the true [Pg 198] gem of the sea. So artistic was the work that small imperfections in shape and flaws in tinting had been carefully reproduced, the monotony of a mechanical perfection being thus avoided. Really they were very beautiful, and among those selected strands intended for the throat it was as if color, having life and breath, a rosy pink, had gently breathed across their milky lustre, faintly flushing the swelling round of each great pearl. Nor were they too frail for service; weight and solidity made them almost as durable as the true jewel's self. And here was bunch after bunch of seed pearls, so small, for embroidery on lace or satin; long strands for plaiting in the hair, for the suspension from the waist of feather fan or tiny mirrors à la Marie Stuart, when dauphine of France; great girdles for the waist, whose pendant tassels fell almost to the wearer's feet. And at last—at last, the heavy net which he so much wished to see upon that waywardly waving dark cloud of hair!

Old Angelique, having raised a sternly instructing index finger to close proximity with Sybil's glowing face, proceeded to strike off with it upon the air these verbal commands: "You will do exact now as I tell you, if you wish to look the little Juliet—so high-bred, so headstrong, yet so young! Mais, *so* young—mon Dieu! mon Dieu! comme—like a bébé! Now make the mark of my words, Miss—Miss—er? Lawsons! oui! oui! merci! For I have in the mind that Juliet—me—I know! So you must make no height on the top of the head, no cross braid, no pile up curl, no coronet! No—no! that make very handsome, mais—but not *the Juliet*! Tumble the hair to the shoulders, [Pg 199] half curl! No curl, all regular! Wat is call 'em, 'em ring-a-let? No! no! half-curl, half-wave—oui! all natural! And for the front, the hair all fluff—so! [puffing out her breath]—low to the brows, that the big eyes look from under it, like from a cloud. Then turn all back from the cheeks, after the manner of the angels in the old masters' pictures! Obey me, and you shall see! The city shall see! Why, even now!" She flung the net upon Sybil's head, drawing a pear-shaped pendant pearl forward to rest upon her brow, rapidly twisted the white lace scarf about her shoulders to hide the street gown, threw a rope of pearls about her neck, and with triumphant eyes turned to Thrall, saying: "Is not the Italian angel's the coiffure correct for this, Miss Lawsons?"

Thrall answered, briefly, "Quite correct!"

And Sybil, with an ecstatic sigh, said again: "How I do wish Dorothy were here!"

And Thrall commented: "Your lovers have cause for jealousy of that young sister, I fancy, Miss Lawton?"

But, with careless frankness, Sybil answered: "I never had a lover in my life! So Dorrie can have caused no jealousy, you see!" and turned her whole attention back to Nonna Angelique, who was checking off costumes on her fingers.

And she would have been an astonished girl had she been told that her brusquely spoken words had made this man's heart leap in his breast, as no seductive wile of most tactful coquetry could have done; and the fact that he had no right to heed the words of any maid, however sweet or [Pg 200] fair, did nothing to check that hurried thumping at his ribs. For, like many other men, he had something of the explorer's spirit about him—something that responded eagerly to the charm of the strange, the vague, the new,—something that makes the would-be explorer of the terra

incognita ignore all thought of danger, and dream only of the beauty of virgin forests, strange flowers, and fabled fountains of youth and love eternal! No one could have guessed that the calm-faced, stately gentleman, looking on at the selection of Juliet's finery, was mentally repeating those candid, girlish words: "I never had a lover in my life!"

"Ah, no!" he thought; "no more had Juliet ever had a lover in her life, up to an hour before that 'trifling, foolish banquet,' given by old Capulet. Yet, ere its end, swift love had grown so great that she had declared already for the grave, if 'twere a passion unrequited!"

Then old Angelique broke in upon his thought, and claimed attention with: "The cloak, now, Mr. Thrall—the cloak for the visit to old Laurence's cell? Shall it be black or brown or gray?"

"Gray!" he answered, readily. "Dark gray, I think, gives a hint of mystery. Though, 'tis true, Juliet seeks the Friar with her parents' knowledge, still it is with secret purpose. So gray and very large and full and hooded, Nonna Angelique, so that a young maid might slip like a shadow by high walls and through Verona's streets to the cloisters of the convent without revealing a trace of beauty or of rich attire." [Pg 201]

"C'est bon! c'est bon!" nodded Lefebvre, taking a prodigious pinch of snuff, and entering in a greasy little note-book "One large, gray, circle cloak, hooded"—"c'est bon!"

On Angelique's four fingers her grimy thumb checked off "Cloak for Friar's cell—gray. Chamber scene—white, of course, but flowing, loose, long, light as air. For tomb—white also, but heavy, rich, eh? The satin gown for County Paris bride, and only one spot of color, eh? The jewelled sheath of the dagger, at the waist. Oh, yes! oh, yes! all that is clear, but—but, my Mr. Manager, how shall it be for the ball—for that first time to meet the Romeo—eh?"

She pursed her lips, she scratched her forehead thoughtfully, and so pushed her false front over to a most rakish angle. But the old man shuffled across the room, and with a: "Permettez that I correct the coiffure, my Angelique! It have slide, and it make a little of what you call the—the 'jaky' look! That way—so!" And with the palms of both hands he calmly replaced the foxy-red front, and the search for a color suitable for the first act went on.

Thrall, drawing his hand lightly across the loosened folds of many webs, over purples, mauves, ambers, with a snapping accompaniment of "No! no! no!" paused, by merest chance, at a delicate blue brocade, at which Angelique almost shrieked: "No! no!—I say no! Pretty? Yes, mais too calm —cool—collected—obedient! Ah, bah! A fool color! What, that amber would become her? Hear you that, old man?" She appealed to Lefebvre with up-cast hands: "Y-es, and it would be Spanish in effect! Oh, what *is* it that we want?" [Pg 202]

The old man squinted up his eyes, and, studying Sybil, answered: "Something happy, v-e-r-y happy! Something like a flower, a-a very early flower—but what?"

And Thrall, who had caught the old snuff-taker's idea, asked, quickly: "Why not the blossom of the peach? That's early!"

"God bless the man!" cried Nonna Angelique, throwing her arms about him in frantic demonstration of delight. "It is the coup-de-grâce! The pinks, mon mari! vite! vite done! Vraiment you have the head still! A happy color, said you!"

She threw out a fold of satin her husband offered: "Non! non! it is too deep—too common!" Another: "Bah! too pale, but mere flesh color!" A beautiful bright pink brocade next was tried. "Oh, non! non!" she almost cried from disappointment; "too-'er, too-'er!" In despair she resorted to pantomime to help make her meaning clear, and, catching up her skimpy alpaca skirt, she danced a wild step or two, saying: "Too comme-ça! too what you call 'frisky,' eh? You feel me, what I mean? But that sweet, first flowering thing—that soft promise of the spring, that peach-blossom pink, that would make this dark girl beautiful—can I not find it, then?" She beat her breast with Gallic despair. Lefebvre clutched his few hairs, and apparently pulled up a memory, and cried: "One chance more! The old chest with Eastern things! India, China, Japan!" He disappeared—he lost a shoe, but left it lying till he came back, and slid into it in passing. Some rolls were cast down, soft, non-crackling paper removed, and, with cries of joy and gurgles of delight, Nonna Angelique flung out, fold upon fold, a silky crêpe of so pure and true a peach-blossom pink that the petals of the flower itself scattered over it could hardly have been perceived. [Pg 203]

Pearls with this color would be perfection. Then the round white fan, dagger,—everything ordered, the measures were taken in the inner room of shelves, a day fixed for fitting, and, quivering with excitement and delight, Sybil was descending the house-steps, when Jim Roberts came up to Thrall, and looking rather oddly at him—the girl thought—said: "The property-man says that cloisonné-jar you made such a fuss about was cared for by the Missus. So, if you want it used, give me her key!"

There was a sort of half-frightened daring in the pale face of Roberts, and the look of sardonic comprehension burning in Thrall's eyes might well have shaken the nerves of such a poor wreck as he answered: "We won't trouble about the cloisonné, just now; but I understand your good intention in following me here to tell me about it. And—I—shall—remember—it! Oh, here's your car, Miss Lawton; good-by!" [Pg 204]

CHAPTER XVIII

A LOVER'S PLEA

With all her gentleness, Dorothy Lawton was not without spirit, and she might have resented the unauthorized announcement made by Leslie Galt had she not been reduced to helpless terror by the prompt reappearance of William Henry Bulkley, pompously claiming the privilege of "restoring her to her home and her parents."

Trembling like a leaf, she lifted pleading eyes to Galt, who, reading with deep gratitude their prayer, answered it by turning to the old beau, and coldly remarking that "the doctor had placed his carriage at Miss Lawton's service, and together they were about to escort her home."

"You will do nothing of the kind, sir!" blustered the bombastic William Henry. "This young lady was placed under my care. I have been made responsible for her safety; therefore, she will return home under my escort, sir!"

"Safety?" sneered Galt. "That word does not come gracefully from your lips! Safety? Your utter irresponsibility is amply illustrated by the injuries Miss Lawton has received while under your thoughtful care!" [Pg 205]

"Anyone," hotly interrupted Mr. Bulkley, "anyone may be the victim of an act of Providence, of—of a catastrophe!"

"Act of Providence!" cried Galt; "act of bad temper—act of stupid discourtesy! No man has the right to take a woman out behind a tricky horse, even when he exercises every caution in handling him! And no one but a madman or a man in an unspeakably bad temper would think of leaving a woman alone and utterly at the mercy of a shying, nervous brute! The wonder is that we have been spared a tragedy to-day! And this young lady can scarcely be blamed for not wishing to trust herself to such doubtful protection again!"

"You will let the young lady speak for herself, you young upstart!" answered the now furious Mr. Bulkley. "She will do well to remember she is still in tutelage to her parents, and that by a parent she was given to my care!" Then, turning to the girl, he went on: "I have obtained a buggy from the livery man, and we can start at once!"

"Oh, Mr. Bulkley," quavered Dorothy, "I can't! I am afraid of that horse! Please—please don't ask me to ride behind him again!"

She trembled so violently that the doctor interposed, saying, curtly: "I must disallow your claim, sir! My patient's nerves are to be considered, and, really, though you were acting as the young lady's escort for this unfortunate drive, it seems to me her fiancé is the proper person to look after her now!"

William Henry Bulkley's eyes stood out like a crab's. His red face purpled. He breathed in loud gasps. "Her—her what?" he exclaimed. "Her fiancé! Who the devil are you talking about? She has no fiancé!" [Pg 206]

The doctor had raised Dorothy and given her his arm, but now he turned in astonishment from the white, set face of Galt to the red fury of Bulkley, and back again. When, with a little tremulous laugh, Dorothy, with surprised blue eyes, said: "Why, Mr. Bulkley, were you not told, then? Now, had you been a woman," she held out her hand, the third finger all brave with flashing solitaire, "you would not have needed telling. See?"

And Leslie, bending to draw down her veil and hide the wounded cheek, whispered: "Ah! my love! my love!"

And then they were in the doctor's carriage and on the way to Woodsedge, while William Henry Bulkley, in a black devil's rage, followed.

John Lawton had returned from his walk, and, as a hen-mother frets over her ducklings in the water, so he fretted over the absence of both his girls. He wandered aimlessly about, instead of piling up the wood in the shed, as he had intended doing, while the lengthening absence of Dorothy filled Mrs. Lawton with secret satisfaction. They were taking a drive, just as she had intended they should, and Mr. Bulkley was undoubtedly making the most of his opportunity. She hoped he might not make the mistake of being too—too impulsively ardent. "Very young girls sometimes take alarm so easily!" she thought. "And Dorrie is the merest baby in such matters!" [Pg 207]

And then confusion reigned, when, with helpless arm, bruised, cut face, and yet such curiously shining eyes, Dorothy, who had gone forth with Mr. Bulkley, was assisted into the house by a strange doctor and young Galt. Then came tender greetings, hurried footsteps, and curt explanations. The doctor, aided by the temporarily German-speaking Lena, whose fright had strangled English in her very throat, was attending the injured girl in her own room. Letitia was weeping hysterically, and John Lawton, the father, was struggling hard to maintain the composure expected of Mr. Lawton, the man. For the calm indifference of a doctor's attitude toward a simple fracture, especially when young bones are in question, is rarely emulated by anxious relatives. Even within the ordinary family circle a broken limb is regarded as a serious mishap; but in this abode of genteel poverty, where yet there was such wealth of family love, a daughter's broken arm was a terrifying disaster, a grievous catastrophe.

Mrs. Lawton was piteously inquiring of heaven, which she seemingly located in the far corner of the ceiling, near the biggest stain: "Why had she permitted Sybil to leave her alone, to face the contretemps that was sure to occur in her most desolate hour?" ignoring the fact that her "desolate hour" had been carefully contrived by herself.

Galt, catching sight of Mr. Lawton, went to him, and, taking his arm, led him out across the porch and drive down to the great old willow, whose mighty drooping made a gray green tent of privacy. Then he seated him, and, taking off his own hat, he stood before the older man, who, [Pg 208] though looking at him with anxious eyes, yet noted the erect figure, the clear gaze, and rather stern, well-featured face, and thought him a goodly sight.

A moment of silence, then Leslie said, slowly: "Mr. Lawton, you have shown me great kindness, and I——"

The old man held up his hand, saying, with quick deprecation: "No! no! Without power, one can show kindness to no man! I like you, my lad! I shall be grateful to you all my life, but I have done you no kindness!"

Leslie moistened his lips as might a nervous girl: "I—you—" he stammered, then went on eagerly —"How well do you like me, sir? Well enough to trust me with—oh, good God!" he cried, "what's the use of beating about the bush? If you don't know it already, you ought to know that I love your daughter with all my heart, and—don't look at me like that, Mr. Lawton! I know I don't deserve her! But—I'd be true to her, as my father was true to his choice before me! If—if Dorothy tells you that she wishes it so, will you then give her to me, for my wife?"

Two slow tears crept into the pale blue eyes. Again there came that piteous, silent movement of the lips, that had so touched Leslie on the day he had rescued the girls from the tunnel accident.

"What is it?" asked Galt, gently. "You know who I am—who my father was. You know personally one, at least, of the firm of Gordon, Stone & Wheatleigh, in whose offices I have read and worked, [Pg 209] and who have promised—but never mind that now. What troubles you so, sir? My past is an open book for you. Is it a question of age?"

John Lawton shook his head, and just then Mr. Bulkley drove through the farthest gate and on up to the house.

They paid no heed to that; Galt went on questioning the silent, distressed, old man: "Is it that you cannot trust me—that you doubt the sincerity of my love?" A faint, reproachful smile accompanied a second shake of the head.

"Is it——" started Leslie.

"It's poverty!" gasped John Lawton. Then, having regained his power of speech, he went on: "Don't ask me to condemn my girl to poverty for life. Love sweetens the draught, but the bitterness is there all the time! Wait, my boy, wait! It is not for her alone I speak! Spare yourself the torment, the shame, the pain of denying to the woman that you love the little fripperies and follies and small luxuries that she craves as a flower craves sunshine! There's no pain like it in the world! And," his lips writhed as he spoke, "I ought to know, for—for ten years past it has so pierced my heart that there can be but a shapeless pulp there now! No! no! you can't afford to marry my daughter!"

"It's hard to think of you as a lover of mammon—a seeker after mere wealth!" frowned Leslie.

"Don't be unjust, my lad. The joy of counting one's dollars in seven figures is a joy without savor for me. Very great wealth is either a great trust or a greater temptation. I neither seek for nor [Pg 210] desire it for our girls; but I cannot calmly face for them a future of such poverty as they are enduring now. You should be able, positively able, to provide at least a modest home; be able to make both of these inelastic ends not only meet but lap over a bit. The poor working-man has a right to marry a poor girl, but a poor gentleman has no right to condemn a girl with the training, tastes, and requirements of a lady to a lifelong struggle with ways and means. Then, remember, when a man marries he not only doubles his joys but his responsibilities as well. Oh, my boy! if only you had a few thousands in hand—a wall to plant your back against if the fight went against you for awhile! But—but, I dare not give my child into empty hands! Why—why—boy? What in heaven's name?"

Galt was flinging his hat high in the autumn sunlight, catching it and flinging it again, like a boy at boisterous play! Then, with dancing eyes, he made apology for his antics, adding: "I have no father, as you know. So I think I'll follow the fashion of the Japanese and adopt one!" taking a chill, veiny old hand in his firm, warm ones. "You, sir, by your leave? So, Father Lawton, listen! I have not deceived you at any time, but I may have been a trifle more reticent than was necessary, for I hate talking of myself. But now I'll tell you what, I see, should have been told before, and, when I've done, I'll ask again for Dorothy! No! no! adopted father, you may only answer yea or nay when you have earned the right by listening!" [Pg 211]

And just then both men fancied they heard a sort of screech from the house, and glanced up toward it. But old John said, indifferently: "An owl, I guess. Lena disturbs them when she's rooting about that tumbling barn behind the cedars. Go on!"

But, up in the sitting-room, William Henry Bulkley, rampant and blindly furious while charging Mrs. Lawton with insincerity and bad faith, had flung the engagement of Dorothy in her

astonished face, and it was the screech of the stricken Letitia that faintly reached them. But Mr. Lawton, whose mind moved slowly, and who, though undoubtedly American, was yet no "guesser," being all at sea as to the meaning of Galt's sudden change from bitter disappointment to an exuberance of spirits he had not thought the grave young man capable of, repeated, more urgently: "Go on, please, go on!"

And, in the handsome weak old face and piteous faded eyes raised to him, Galt saw again the likeness to Dorothy, and, with a pang, he thought: "This is what years of sorrow and privation might put into her fair face," and swiftly prayed, "protect, defend her, Lord, in part at least, through my poor human agency," and then plunged into the simple story, whose telling might change the color of the sky for him and make the old world new for his young sweetheart and himself.

"You remember, sir, I told you before, that it was through Mr. Wheatleigh's friendship for my dead father that I was first taken into the office where so many wished to secure a berth. He advanced me, too, as rapidly as he could, because he knew the mother I worked so hard for [Pg 212] would not be with me long. Well, the only property my father left me, besides a small cottage, was an extensive sweep of swamp, over in our neighboring State. This inheritance was considered a great jest, and was continually referred to as my 'mosquito foundry.' The only harvest ever gathered from its acres was a harvest of poor and pointless jokes. My mother and I used to spend two or three months in the cottage during the summer, and the rest of the year an old couple used it rent free, save for keeping the small shell in repair. That my father had twice refused, when the neighboring town was making spasmodic spurts of growth, to sell portions of his swampy holdings, made people think him quite off his head. But my mother told me he had once declared the time would come when thousands of dollars would be offered eagerly where hundreds were then spoken of grudgingly. She had said, 'Why, do you believe these swamps can ever be made healthy enough to attract the wealthy?' and he had answered, 'My dear wife, wealthy people often have other uses for property than the making of homes. Nor do I anticipate a sudden fad among millionnaires for personally cultivating cranberries. Nevertheless, there's money lying in those mud-flats and out there in the meadows—money waiting for a Galt; and if we don't gather it up, Leslie will.'

"Every word," the young man continued, "I treasured, and while I was yet a lad I used to rack my brain to find a cause for my father's faith, and though I found it not I yet resolved to follow his [Pg 213] plan and—wait. So silently, tenaciously I kept my hold upon my 'mosquito foundry,' and endured many things in the name of wit from my companions, who sought information as to proper 'treatment of stings,' as to the usual period 'for mating among the young birds,' as to the 'outlook for cranberries,' etc. As years went by the subject dropped, thank heaven! I had worked desperately for my mother's needs. Then—well, when I found myself alone, I worked desperately still, to prove to Mr. Wheatleigh that I was grateful. The firm noticed me. They tested my discretion. Then one day old Mr. Gordon said to Mr. Stone: 'A young fellow who can so lock his lips, and give the combination to no one is wanted in this office for confidential work.' It was a big step they offered me, and—and, Father Lawton, I did not have a soul to rejoice with me or say 'well done!' I was so desolately alone in my good fortune that when I locked my room door behind me I buried my face in my mother's old crêpe shawl, and talked to it, and yet," he laughed a little, "upon my soul I quite expect people to consider me a man!

"Well, one day I was mildly surprised to receive a letter making an offer for a small portion of my land. The price was modest—I declined it, briefly. But before I had mailed my note another letter and another offer to purchase reached me. I declined both, and dropped the matter from my mind, when lo! my correspondents renewed their efforts to buy, doubling the price first offered, at a single bound. I had heard of no boom in town lots—no sudden growth outward in my [Pg 214] direction, yet both letters expressly stated that 'simple cottage homes were to be built.' Homes out there on those dreary flats? Builders of simple cottages were rarely able to double an offered price for the ground alone. I astonished Mr. Wheatleigh by asking for half a day's absence. The old pair at the cottage could only tell me that two or three of the widely scattered residents had recently sold out and all but one had gone away. These people had lived along the river. I walked out in that direction, and stopped at the small truck garden, that had been sold but was not yet vacated. I questioned the woman—a dull creature—from whom I gained no information beyond her joy at going to live in the town. Her little girl was teasing for a penny to spend for that childish solace—gum. Being refused, I told her if she would walk along with me for company I would give her a nickel; I paid in advance, and we went out together. She was a sharp little monkey, as keen as her mother was dull. Inquiring about what had been going on, I learned of the advent of six puppies down the road a bit; of the lamentable fate of old Tom Hale, a local ne'er-do-weel, and also of the presence of the 'queer men,' who used to get dinner at her house. 'Why were they queer?' 'Why, because they did funny things, and were squintin' along the road and across the meadows,' 'Squinting?' I repeated. 'Yes,' she explained; 'they had three wooden legs, that had a funny brass and glass fixin' on top, that they squinched through, and then they'd make marks in books and stick sticks in the ground.' Surveyors, I thought. 'And,' went on the [Pg 215] child, 'they used to say, before they came into dinner, "don't talk!"'

"Ah! I pricked up my ears! Surveyors doing work that was not to be talked of. I dropped another nickel into the child's hand. 'Tell me,' I asked, 'what the funny men said outside the house, when they were squinting through the meadows.' The child's face clouded. 'They didn't say nothin'! Must I give back the nickel now?' 'Oh,' I urged, 'they must have talked among themselves, and you must have heard a word now and then, when you were watching them or playing. Come,

think a bit! Perhaps I have another nickel.' Her eyes shone—she knit her brows and bit her lips. 'Well,' she said, doubtfully, 'I 'spose just words without no sense to 'em ain't no use? But they did use to say things about "the shops," and they said, too, "beds" many times.' 'Beds?' I repeated. 'Are you sure?' 'Yes, beds, 'cause I thought it was a funny thing for a man to say! And—oh, yes! Once, over by that mud flat, they said that their "beds" would cost lots of money, and one man said they might be glad there wasn't snakes here to cost more. And I told 'em there was snakes in some places, and they laughed at me, they did.' I caught her hand, and said: 'Lou, think again. Did not the men talk of "road-beds"?' I held my breath till the answer came. 'Well, my ma says I'm a fool, and I guess I am. That is just the kind of beds they said, "road-beds."' 'Oh, thank you, thank you!' I replied, for, like a cheap modern god, I showered my small Danaë, not with gold, but with nickels and with dimes. [Pg 216]

"I understood at last the possible value of my property. Mosquito stock went up! This child had given me the clew to what was going on. At once I laid the facts before Mr. Wheatleigh. He chuckled. 'Leave this matter with us, my boy. Railroads are bulldozers! They pay low to the poor, but high to the rich and strong. If this thing works out as it should, and you should care to enter our firm as its youngest member in, say another year, I think it can be arranged.' Well, Father Lawton, it has been arranged, and the day that made me independent of money worries was the very day of the railroad accident in the tunnel. And as the crash came I was looking at Dorothy with all my heart in my eyes, for I had seen her twice before, and I knew quite well that I loved her, and that I should marry her, if we both lived long enough. You, sir, can have full details of my financial situation whenever you may desire. 'Tis true I have no splendor to offer. My only Aladdin's lamp is the partnership, but in such a firm that means rare opportunity, and good work brings good pay. But even Aladdin had to rub his lamp before his wish was granted. So, never doubt my willingness to rub my lamp hard. I may not promise both town and country houses; and butler, coachman, and groom may be conspicuous by their absence—just at first. But a home, a pretty one of her very own, a few maids inside, a man to potter about a bit of lawn, and a jewel-box not quite empty—so much I can safely and reasonably promise to my wife, if you will trust your little girl to my honor and my love! Once more, Mr. Lawton, will you give me your daughter [Pg 217] Dorothy for wife?"

Lawton closed his eyes, and in that moment he recalled the day when she was gurgling on his clasping arm, the yellow, downy covering of her baby head so like a wee new chick's coat that he had laughed, and when, at the sound, her blue eyes opened wide at him, and with a thrill he noted her likeness to himself. Then, half proud, half pitiful, he had kissed her many times—why! that was only yesterday—surely but little more! Yet, here was this man, almost a stranger, asking her for his wife. He opened his eyes, and asked, piteously: "D-o-e-s, does Dorrie wish this?"

"I think she will tell you so, sir," Leslie answered, gently.

"Have you spoken to Leti—to Mrs. Lawton?"

"N-no, sir," said the young man. "I—I thought I should speak first to you."

"Dear me! I'm afraid you've made a mistake, my boy," murmured the old man, innocently. "Letitia thinks that, in the case of daughters, you understand, the mother is in authority—is the head, so to speak—of the family. You—er, you should have spoken to her, but—now——"

"Yes, sir, now?" eagerly repeated Galt.

The old man rose. He held out his hand, which the younger man grasped tightly. "I believe you are an honest man, and since you have the power to care for and protect her I give you my Dorothy, than whom a truer, sweeter, purer girl God never gave to undeserving father or adoring lover!" [Pg 218]

The two men stood eye to eye a long moment, then Leslie Galt said, slowly: "Thank you, sir!" dropped Lawton's hand, and, turning, walked rapidly away, leaving the shaken, excited, and confused old man in his gray green tent, trying to straighten things out and prepare himself for the meeting with his Letitia. [Pg 219]

CHAPTER XIX

A FAMILY SCENE

While Mr. Lawton still strove to regain his self-control he saw, passing out through the further gate, the big chestnut, the battered looking livery buggy, and the gorgeous William Henry Bulkley, whose cowed, dispirited "man" was driving, while he—W. H.—gave himself the pleasure of vigorously damning the entire outfit, individually and collectively. A little later the doctor drove his lightly built, dark bays out—full sisters they were, with faces so kind and manners so gentle as always to suggest a pair of nurses. After that John Lawton thought he might then go up to the house and get a quiet peep at Dorothy, whose face he half expected to see changed somehow since she had given him her morning kiss. "She had been a child then, and now, yes now, she was a woman." He did not realize that the sudden change had been but in his point of view.

Walking slowly up the steep rise to the porch, he thought he heard high voices, and, opening the door, he stood amazed. Looking up, where at the stair-top German Lena stood, one outstretched hand against the wall, the other on the bannister, both feet braced firm and wide apart, her small blue eyes a-light, a girl on guard! And just beneath her, hair disarranged, face crimson, and eyes [Pg 220] snapping, Mrs. Lawton, in high, piercing tones, was spitting and hissing abusive epithets:

"You! how dare you? You German steerage rat! You stupid wooden-headed, wooden-shod *thing*! How dare you—dare you! In my days of wealth, my housekeeper, my *cook*, wouldn't have allowed you to care for my pots and pans! My daughter's nothing to you! I can say what I please to her, and say it how I please! How dare you interfere! You shall feel the law for your Dutch insolence! Stand aside, and let me into that room!"

"Nein! *nein!*" said Lena, savagely. "*Nein!* I don't stand on my sides! I make by Herr Doctor's orders, und I keep my Miss Lady quiet uf I can!" Then, catching sight of John Lawton, she cried: "Oh, my Herr Mister! is dat you? Oh, you vas velcome as never vas!"

"John Lawton!" cried Mrs. Lawton, at the same time, "if you have one spark of manhood in you, if you even dimly remember your promise to protect and cherish me, you will order this crazy Dutch slattern to the scullery!"

"Letitia! Letitia!" remonstrated the mortified and bewildered man, "come away, I beg of you, and explain quietly what has happened."

But a perfect shriek of rage leapt from the woman's throat: "What has happened? Do you know, that *thing* there has struck me—me—a lady!"

"Nein! nein!" stoutly protested Lena, "I don't strike nobodys, my Herr Mister! She com' mad by [Pg 221] me! for dat—dat doctor mans—ven he have put der sticks und shplinters on der Miss Lady's arm, dat com' got break by der Bergamots man, he com' say dat I must make for der quiet! Und two time he tell me dot! He say she make of der fever rite avay quick uf she com' get excite! und nobody shall com' by her, for much talk! Und I shall vatch until der odder vun, der Miss Sybells com', und take care by her! Und—und—I tell you true now, Herr Boss, he say der mutter downstair seem very hy-strikle like, und not fit to com' by der sickroom! Und den he go und der Frau Mistress, she com' fly in der room, und she com' mad like a vitch! Und she say some tings at my Miss Lady 'how she dare do sometings?' Und my Miss Lady, she com' vite, com' red, und begin shake! Und I say, 'Blease for go!' Und she say, 'Miss Doroty is a God-forsakens simpletons!' und I say vonce more, 'Blease!' und—und den I don't strike, I don't shuf der Frau Mistress, I youst pick her round by der waist, und I histe her out of der room! Und she shmack me on der cheek und try to come by der room again! Und I lock der door, und now I stand here und keep my Miss Lady quiet, youst so long as I have der legs to shtand by! Ja! So!"

The old man's face was a study of pained bewilderment. He slowly ascended the stairs, and taking by the arm the dishevelled creature, in whom it was hard for him to recognize his wife, he said: "Come to your room, Letitia. You will bring upon yourself an attack of nerves if this continues. You need some drops." And the innocently spoken words wrung a cry of rage from the [Pg 222] woman, as she recalled how, down-stairs, a few minutes before, William Henry Bulkley had hurled the bottle across the room to the sofa, with the courteous words: "There's your damned old drops! Much good they've done us, haven't they!"

"Come!" continued John. Then, looking back, he added to Lena: "Open Miss Dorothy's door and tell her 'my love' and I'll be with her directly, and will read a little out of Sybbie's play to her while you get tea ready."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Mrs. Lawton. "When you hear of her outrageous conduct it will be a lecture, not Sybil's play, that you will read! Anything, *anything* but slyness in a girl!"

"*Letitia!*" The tone rather startled the angry woman. She allowed herself to be led into her room, where John filled the basin with water, added a little cologne, and opened out a fresh towel ready for use. For though Letitia had had no maid for years past, she had not been without trained service. Now, however, she could not put aside her grievance even to lave her burning face. She went on: "Never have I been so—so discredited, so lowered, so belittled! One does not often meet two such hypocrites on the same day! She, with her pretended coyness and shyness! That any child of mine should be capable of such deception, such concealment!"

"My dear! my dear!" interrupted John Lawton, "you are not stopping to consider the force of your words. There has been no deception, no concealment. Our young people have been learning to [Pg 223] love each other, wife, and we were too blind to see what was going on."

"W-why! w-why! do you know about it?" surprisedly questioned Mrs. Lawton. "Did Mr. Bulkley tell you, too, before he drove away?"

"Mr. Bulkley?" frowned Lawton, "I don't see what on earth Mr. Bulkley has to do with our affairs. Besides, he has been most unpleasant in his manner toward Leslie Galt."

"It's a pity that we have not followed his example—the young hypocrite! with his suave tone and underhand conduct!"

"No! no!" interrupted Lawton, "there has been nothing underhand in Leslie Galt's conduct. He loves Dorothy; there's no crime in that, surely, and he has come like a man and asked for her, and ——"

"And you! Have you presumed to encourage that mere salaried clerk to hope to marry a Lawton? Understand this, if any child of mine ever went to live in a flat, I would not recognize her though she lay upon her death-bed! To be dragged down to poverty by another [the old man winced] is no crime, but to deliberately choose poverty is a vulgarity that is worse than crime! You will forbid this thing at once! What—love? They love each other? Bah! He's got a straight, flat back and good teeth and eyes—will they make up for a shabby wardrobe and no visiting list? Love? Love in poverty is an impossibility! I ought to know by this time!" she sneered, bitterly. "I've had plenty of opportunity for experimenting!" Without noticing the quivering of her husband's chin and mouth, she went on: "She's mad or a fool to throw away money and position for some hole-in-a-corner existence with a good-looking lawyer's clerk!" [Pg 224]

"Letitia," broke in her husband very gently, "I don't just know what you mean, my dear, but I suppose you are speaking figuratively of money and position; but if you will let me explain all about young Galt's present standing and his future prospects, I think you will yourself sanction an engagement."

"The prospects of a mere clerk!" she jeered. "What a poor-spirited, broken thing you have become, calmly permitting one daughter to go upon the public stage, and giving the other to the first poverty-stricken applicant that asks for her! No! I'm not speaking figuratively of money and position! They are within her reach, and she shall accept them! She has no right to keep me in poverty, because she prefers it for herself! The time will come when she will thank me for my interference—that is, if she has not driven the man off forever! Perhaps even I may not be able to whistle back a Mr. Bulkley, once he is gone!"

"*My God!*" the words came in a sort of choking gasp. The man's pale eyes stared at her with a sort of questioning horror. "You do not mean—you can not mean?"

"I mean," recklessly responded the woman, "that with a few smiles and half promises from Dorothy and a little veiled management on my part, her well-ringed fingers might this moment be holding the strings of the Bulkley purse!" [Pg 225]

"She must be mad!" interjected the trembling voice of the husband, as if thinking aloud. "It is a charity to believe her mad!"

"Then I'm mad from disappointment and wasted effort. Any opportunity is thrown away upon you! And Sybil hated him and opposed me at every turn! Yet with a little more time my finesse would have brought William Henry Bulkley to the point of marrying Dorothy!"

"*Damnation!*" cried John Lawton, as he sprang to his feet and stood a hard, breathing moment, holding fast to the corner of the dressing-table for support. His pale eyes shone with the phosphorescent glare of the angry cat. His long fingers opened and closed convulsively. For the first time in all her life, Letitia saw danger in him.

"You—are—an—infamous woman!" The words came slowly and with effort from his tremulous lips. "You have forgotten your motherhood, your womanhood! But you never forget the sweetly spicy savor of the flesh-pots of Egypt! No!" he cried with increasing anger, "nor have you forgotten the nature, the gross brutality, of this man, who has control of the flesh-pots you still dream of! You have not forgotten either the long, slow dying of his faithful wife, whom he crowned with public infamies! And since that time you know, as all people know, he has been one of the mightiest in a very sink of iniquity—know him to be a walking danger to unprotected innocence and a vainglorious 'friend' of fashionable vice! Yet to this immorality add an uncontrollably violent temper, impaired health, and a grandfather's years; and for a few fripperies and gew-gaws, a wrap or two of fur and velvet for the satisfaction of your vanity, you would fling, without a thought of her pure soul's fate—fling the white, sweet body of your innocent child into his foul embrace, relying on the name of wife to cover the iniquity! Dorothy, my little white-souled woman-child, and Bulkley? I—I wonder—I don't kill you, Letitia!" [Pg 226]

He advanced toward her so fiercely that she shrank back, crying out in terror: "John! John! don't hurt me!"

"Why not?" he asked, savagely. "Why not? Do you know what you have done for me? You have dragged down the woman I have loved and honored as my wife—down, down to within one step of being a procu——!"

Her sharp scream of shame and terror cut across the hideous word.

"No, I won't hurt you; but oh, God! oh, God! to wake and find the wife you have pillowed on your breast for twenty years is, after all, a stranger to you! That hurts!—yes, that hurts!"

He passed his hand across his eyes, then he said, sternly: "Never bring that man into Dorothy's presence again—I forbid it! Yes, I told you you would make yourself ill!"

But as she lapsed into a faint she was dimly conscious that John was leaving the room. She had gone too far—her slave had rebelled for once. He who always had waited upon her himself in her previous attacks, now called on Lena to attend her and get her to bed, while he went to Dorothy's room and kissed and blessed her and made her very soul sing for joy, because he praised her beloved. [Pg 227]

And in the silence, when his cheek rested on her piled-up sunny hair, she did not know of the bitter tears creeping down his face—tears of disapppointment and sorrow, because he had that

day learned that the wife he believed to be but frivolous was in truth a personified selfishness. [Pg 228]

CHAPTER XX

A PROFESSIONAL LESSON

Sybil, hurried by a message from Leslie Galt, had come flying back from the city to the aid of her injured sister; and, as she dropped upon her knees beside the bed, she cried, breathlessly: "Oh, Dorrie! what an unfortunate, lucky, lucky girl you are!"—a bull that scattered threatening tears and set them both laughing.

As Sybil tossed off her street garments and prepared to make Dorothy more comfortable, she said, heedlessly: "No wonder you believe so in your God, when He never fails to save you from danger. Let me put myself behind a vicious, bolting brute of a horse, and the Supreme Power would leave me to the broken neck appropriate to the situation; and a good diamond and a lover saved for—why! why! silly girl! I meant no harm! Did I say something irreverent? Oh, don't you understand? My heart's so full of gratitude for your safety, dear, that my head is turning a bit silly. You would trust Him anyway? Of course you would, you loyal little Christian! I have known your prayers unanswered many a long month, and that you thought the fault was somehow yours. You are one of those wonderful beings who could wring joy out of sorrow, believing that 'whom [Pg 229] God loveth, He chasteneth'! I am not saint enough for that, but at this moment my very heart is beating out the triumphant old Doxology, 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow!' because you were not killed yesterday; but are here at home only a little chipped and scratched, and because you have a promised husband and I have a strapping big-promised brother. And I do pray, I honestly do! on my knees, dear! that God will bless you both, and so renew your love each day that it may never grow old. And there's a kiss for *you* [kissing her on the lips], and here's a kiss for *him* [kissing Dorothy's cheek], and, ah! you simpleton—you—you boiled beet! Oh, why have you an arm in splints? To blush so idiotically before just *me*! Oh, what joy it would be to pound you with a pillow! But sit up instead, and let me brush that tangled hair. The idea of poor papa trying to arrange it for the night, and yet his efforts were to be preferred to Lena's. Now, miss, while I am engaged behind you with the brush, you may proceed to explain how it feels to wear a solitaire—such a solitary solitaire! Poor little ringless-fingers girl! And you may also throw some light upon the feelings of a young person who engages herself to be married over her elder sister's head."

But Dorothy had groaned a little from pain, and Sybil silenced her teasing tongue, made Dorothy all orderly and comfortable, cast hemp-seed recklessly before noisy Dick to buy his quiet; and then, seating herself by the bed, was studying Juliet's lines while Dorothy dozed, until awakened [Pg 230] by the arrival of a big bunch of flowers and a note.

For several days there seemed to be an odd constraint upon the household. John Lawton, always rather silent, now became fairly dumb. He never entered the sitting-room, but remained out of doors nearly all the time.

Mrs. Lawton looked heavy-eyed and nervous, and evidently greatly missed Dorothy's care and gentle coddling. Lena she had attempted to ignore; but, alas, she depended too utterly upon that sole servitor for food and drink and warmth and order. So she had to content herself with giving commands in a very cold voice, using very large words, and averting her face during their delivery. Her manner during her short visits to the girls' room was one of poorly restrained anger. She had not seen Dorothy alone since her attempted lecture on the day of the accident; and, as John Lawton had never resumed the interrupted subject of the hated engagement, she remained uninformed as to Leslie Galt's bright prospects until that day when, with nerve worthy of respect, he had presented himself before the irate mother of his sweetheart, and, remembering her contemptuous disregard of the famous warning against "Greeks bearing gifts"—knowing, indeed, that she really had no use for Greeks otherwise engaged—he kept some suggestive small packages in evidence as he entered the sitting-room.

And as he brought himself a chair and placed it close to her never-resting "rocker," he recognized in the buzzing swarm of verbal wasps she turned loose upon him the words "disrespectful— [Pg 231] unnerved—paralysed—disingenuous—stealthy—infringing—intruding—inveigling," and with failing breath the last warning injunction: "And let me hear no panegyrical eulogy on poverty, if you please, sir!"

Then with a wisdom far beyond his years he retired to the background his lover's raptures, his glowing admiration for her daughter's beauty; and bringing forward the thrilling question of "pounds, shillings, and pence," they soon resolved themselves into a "ways and means committee." And presently Letitia's wasps turned to bees, and the bees began to bear the honey of sweet words.

Then she accepted most graciously these offerings, and bridled and declared she "already felt quite old at the prospect of mothering such a great wicked man!" And when he made the usual complimentary rejoinder, she pronounced him "saucy," and "wondered, if he talked in that fashion to her, what on earth he would not say to Dorothy!" and was full of regret when he insisted upon going out to look for Mr. Lawton. Then up she went to the room above, where

Dorothy was holding the play-book in her free hand and giving the cues, while Sybil repeated her lines to see how nearly letter perfect she was.

Both girls exclaimed: "Why, mamma!" Her expression had changed so completely and her walk was so important—quite her old-time society movement. And then as she approached the bed they caught the first glimpse of a long fine chain of exquisite workmanship, strung at intervals of five or six inches with pale pink coral beads that were in turn girdled with a circle of tiny diamonds. [Pg 232]

Mrs. Lawton ostentatiously lifted her lorgnon, and again the girls exclaimed: "Why, mamma!" And then, as she stooped over to kiss Dorothy, she remarked, quite patronizingly: "Yes, our Leslie is very generous and thoughtful. He wanted me to have a little memento of your engagement, dear fellow!"

She did not add that the other memento was a large Strasbourg pâté. She kept that fact, like the pâté, to herself.

Some weeks slipped by, and early winter was turning the old white house into a very Franz Joseph Land. "Oh!" cried Dorothy one day, "to think of your having to buy all the coal, Sybil! What stupid things the conventions are! I may accept any extravagant outlay of money in flowers or candy or fruit, but the entire family would be under the grand taboo if I received a ton of coal or a barrel of flour."

"Is the flour out, dear?" quickly asked Sybil, laying down her play-book. "Have you been worrying your poor little head? Don't hide things from me, Dorrie! If I have the money, I love to spend it for home. Of course my salary is small, but, dear heaven! what should we have done without it in this old sieve of a building, where fuel simply melts away, and the grate or stove is always calling out for more? Oh, Dorrie, if I could only make a hit in Juliet! Mr. Thrall would surely raise my salary; [Pg 233] yes, in spite of the cost of those costumes that fall upon him, poor man! Are they not a wonderful people—Claire Morrell and Stewart Thrall? Think of the kindness of that woman to me, a nobody! And think of such an actor as Thrall—Stewart Thrall—taking the trouble to teach me the business of Juliet, his very self. Oh, I shall be so frightened! Dorrie, Mr. Roberts has been very patient, going over and over the scenes with me; telling me where I am to stand and where the other people will be, and what they will do, but he never has taught me anything about the actual acting of Juliet. And now to think that I am to be coached at God-mother Van Camp's house by Mr. Thrall in person! I only hope and pray he may not light up as he does sometimes when he is acting, for, if he does, I shall forget my own lines in rapturously listening to him. Do you know, Mr. Roberts is sorry that Mr. Thrall ever undertook the management of a theatre?"

"Why?" asked Dorothy, "he is successful—he must make a great deal of money?"

"That is the very thing poor Mr. Roberts bemoans. He says the artist in him has been suffocated by his commercially won money. He says that Mr. Thrall will himself admit that his acting to-day is not as convincingly true and fine as it was five years ago. Because then he was all enthusiasm, and believed in the dignity and beauty of the art of acting, while to-day he regards it as a means to an end—and that end, money. Poor Mr. Roberts, he seems to know so much about the [Pg 234] profession, and yet only plays such small parts. It must be very humiliating. His lip curled so contemptuously when he told me he was going to play the Apothecary. Do you know, Dorrie, I have a suspicion about him, poor man! He always, always smells of cloves, and twice yesterday when he pulled out his handkerchief some cloves fell to the floor, and I said: 'I believe you have a corner on cloves, Mr. Roberts.' And, oh, his poor face turned so red, and I added, hurriedly, 'Don't you think the excessive use of cloves may be injurious to the digestion?' 'Possibly,' he answered, satirically, 'and doubtless still more injurious to the reputation.' I saw his trembling hands; I recalled the watery look his eyes sometimes have; his rapid, almost incoherent speech as opposed to his long silences; and, all at once, I suspected him of drinking."

"Sybil!" exclaimed Dorothy in a shocked voice, "and you have been under his care, and may be again, and he——"

"Has acted like some kind and patient old relative or friend of the family; don't let us forget that. Besides, I may be wrong and ungrateful in suspecting such a thing, but—but it would explain why Mr. Thrall, whom he so admires, only trusts him with such poor, small parts."

Sybil had been nursing her right elbow in her left hand while speaking, and now suddenly exclaimed: "Oh, where's the arnica bottle? I can't bear this last bruise—it's the worst one yet!"

"The bottle is on the wash-stand behind the ewer, but I'm afraid it's nearly empty, for Lena fairly [Pg 235] baptized me with it that day of the——"

"Circus?" put in Sybil. "Just look, Dorrie." She pushed up her loose sleeve, and her sister gave a cry of pity at sight of a cruel black bruise on that most sensitive spot—the elbow.

"And your poor shoulder only yesterday?"

"And my poor knees only last week!" ruefully groaned Sybil, tenderly sopping some arnica dregs upon the bruised member.

"Oh, those black knees!" giggled Dorothy, "they looked as if you had knelt in the coal cellar!"

"You heartless little beast!" cried Sybil. "See here, if you laugh at my professional troubles and ensuing physical pains—I'll——"

"You can't pound me," triumphed Dorothy, "my arm is too weak!"

"No, but I can do worse! Lena has fully informed you of the horrors that follow upon 'calling a maid by a married name,' and the certainty that said maid will never have a married name to be called by, so Mrs.—Mrs.——"

"Oh, Syb! Syb! don't!" pleaded the repentant one. "Syb, I'm awfully sorry for your knees—honestly I am! And if I could fall for you, I would—gladly; though how in mercy's name actresses tumble down in faints or in death-scenes, without either breaking their bones or getting laughed at, is more than I can understand."

"Oh, it's the fear of being laughed at that tortures me, Dorrie. I could never, never face an audience again. Why, last summer out at the Soldiers' Home theatre, a woman had to fall in the [Pg 236] play and the people fairly screamed with laughter, and a newspaper said that 'Miss —— had not fallen, but had tumbled down in sections.' Ever since I have been studying this part, I have agonized over my fall, and with what result? I've bruised myself from head to foot; shaken mamma's nerves—crumbled the ceiling—frightened papa out of the house at each crash, and"—actually tears were in Sybil's dark eyes—"and I always land in a hunched-up heap that would arouse scornful merriment in the very supers."

"Poor Sybbie!" condoled Dorothy. Then more brightly: "As you can't ask Mr. Thrall or Mr. Roberts to help you, why don't you go over to Brooklyn; make papa take you—Claire Morrell's playing there this week. Ask for just a moment's interview, and make a clean breast of your trouble to her. I'm sure she would help you—she's so kind."

"Oh, I hate to trouble her when she is working so hard; and, besides, I am afraid falling is a thing that can't be taught, Dorothy. But, oh, do you remember her lovely fall in 'Camille'—the ballroom one I mean—all stretched out so long and smooth, and yet falling with a crash that made you nearly leap from your chair? It's a mystery beyond my solving."

"Lena's mash-man told her—Miss Morrell's coachman told *him*—she was coming over home one day this week, and perhaps——"

Jangle-jangle interrupted the bell at the front door, followed by the peculiarly business-like tread of Lena that ever indicated a suspicion of pedler or tramp, and a shuffling, slippered flight by [Pg 237] Mrs. Lawton, who hissed over the banisters: "Say I'm lying down, resting, but will descend—that is, if she has sufficient knowledge of the amenities of social life to ask for me instead of my offspring."

Then as the girls gazed wonderingly at each other Lena appeared, smiling broadly, but somewhat puzzled too, saying: "The big actor voman's com' und ask for der mudder und for der miss ladies. Und I say ja, dey all com' by der house, und blease com' in by der sittin'-rooms, 'cause we didn't ever make of der fire in der parlor. Und she say dat vas right, der parlor never com' like a home, und I com' up to tell. Und she leave all dose visitin' tickets on der hall table. Und I don't know for vy." And she held out five cards, adding, distressedly, "Und von of 'em has a man's name on it. Dat com' by mistake, eh? I take dat back to her?"

"No, no! Lena!" laughed the girls, "that's the card of her husband!"

"Vell, shall I take back of der extra tickets? She com', a nice voman, und it is too bad to have of der tickets vasted?"

"Oh, Lena! do go and tell mamma Miss Morrell is waiting, and leave the cards alone," said Dorothy, "and we will explain about them to you by and by!"

And after Mrs. Lawton had attempted to crush her caller by explaining the "wait" for her descent by the statement that she "hardly expected callers before three," Miss Morrell, with a gracious ignoring of the intended snub that the girls adored her for, proceeded to explain the necessity of [Pg 238] calling early or not at all, as she had to return to Brooklyn in time for her play. Whereupon Mrs. Lawton found herself, to her own surprise be it stated, descending from her high horse and eagerly discussing the probabilities of English five-o'clock teas ever becoming really domesticated in America. And presently she went in search of Mr. Lawton (whom she knew to be in the kitchen whittling kindlings for the quick lighting of Lena's fire in the arctic-like morning).

And then Miss Morrell, happening to press Sybil's arm, brought forth a whimper of pain and an exhibition of bruises the cause of which she comprehended in a moment. "Oh, you poor mottled child—what a state you must be in? Have you been falling on the bare floor, then?"

"I've tried to fall on a mattress," confessed Sybil, "but some part of me always flies over on the floor."

Miss Morrell threw back her head and laughed till the tears stood in her eyes. "Then you must let me help you," she said, "it is very, very easy." She was drawing off her gloves as she spoke, and, tossing them to the piano, she stepped toward the centre of the room, saying, "You see, now—" She raised her hands toward her head, and without further preparation, without a warning word, she fell suddenly face downward with a crash that made things jingle on the mantel, and brought

two startled screams from the girls and Mr. Lawton rushing to her assistance. That gentleman, bending over to lift her, was stricken helpless by her raising her head and asking, pleasantly: "My [Pg 239] skirts are lying all right, aren't they?" Then she added: "Oh, how do you do, Mr. Lawton? Just give me your hand, will you? This dress is a little tight for falling in, and I can't get up." Then, turning to Sybil, she laughed at her astonished face: "I'm afraid you did not catch the trick, did you?"

"Oh!" answered the girl with her hand on her heart, "I never got such a scare in my life! How, oh, how do you do it? Just look at Dorothy! She's quite white."

And it was difficult for the girl to believe that Miss Morrell had not suffered in the least from such a fall.

"Why, it's just a trade secret," laughed the actress. "Some people never fall well because their nerve fails them at the last moment, but all their lives long are content with a sort of jointed fall—they drop on their knees and then forward on their faces. If it is done very quickly it passes, but one never looks graceful, and the immense effect of the crash of the fall is missing. Then, too, an actress who goes down in that manner not only runs the risk of being made fun of, but the bruising over and over again of the same spot may produce a lump with a very ugly and alarming name.

"But here is the whole wonderful secret." She held out her open hands, and both girls saw their palms were slightly reddened. "Always throw out your hand, both of them in beginning; keep your knees nearly stiff, and just topple over like a great tree, but strike on the flats of your open hands. The blow won't hurt them beyond making them sting a little. Your knees, elbows, head, [Pg 240] shoulders, are all safe—yet you have fallen with immense force."

Sybil lifted her hands and made a movement as if about to try the trick, but stopped, looking rather frightened.

"No, no—not here!" said Miss Morrell. "Try on your mattress first, and close your eyes when you have marked where you want to strike, and then the distance won't frighten you so. The bolder you get, the less you will extend your hands. It requires nerve, but I'm sure that is a quality you possess, my dear. Besides, you may not play a part requiring a fall for a year or two yet."

And Sybil blushed hotly because she had been so charged to secrecy that she dared not tell even this woman who was so good to her that she was the girl about whom all the newspaper stories were appearing, and that she was being coached for Juliet.

After a few moments of general conversation the caller rose to go, and, while Mr. Lawton stepped to the door to signal the coachman, who had been keeping his horses moving, Mrs. Lawton explained that in former years the "porte cochère of her old home would have made such action needless, but this," waving her hand condemningly, "was not a home, but—er—er a mere shelter."

"Ah!" graciously responded the actress, "but you know there are people who have the gift of carrying the home atmosphere with them even to a—mere shelter." [Pg 241]

And Mrs. Lawton really looked very handsome and quite impressive, for she felt she was receiving her due, and all the time Sybil was secretly squeezing the fingers of her friend, and in the hall, while her father gallantly opened the carriage door, she whispered: "I love you so for having helped me! And Dorothy prays for you!"

With quick anxiety in eye and voice the woman questioned: "Why not do it yourself, my child?" But good-byes were being repeated, and with that slight sense of dissatisfaction upon her she had to take her departure.

Then the floodgates of Mrs. Lawton's eloquence were opened, and Dorothy and John Lawton were caught in the swirl of eulogy and reminiscence until suddenly a heavy jar overhead and a rattling of mortar between the partitions was followed by a shrill cry of: "I've done it! I've done it! Dorothy! Papa! Mamma! Come here, quick! quick!"

They all fled up the stairs to find Sybil stretched out on her face on a mattress, kicking her slippers impatiently for their coming: "Look at me!" she cried. "See my skirts—they are just exactly as I fell! I haven't moved an inch!"

John said, slowly: "I-t wasn't an accident, was it, daughter? Are you sure you can do it again?"

"Oh, Sybbie!" cried Dorothy, "do try it once more—only be very careful not to fly over and get bruised!"

And willingly enough up scrambled Sybil, and, standing at the foot of the mattress, she threw up her hands and with closed eyes pitched recklessly forward, and arrived in good order to cries of [Pg 242] admiration and wonder from the lookers-on when, suddenly, Lena appeared, saying: "Miss Sybbils, uf you blease, do dose yumps und tumbles in der odder room. Der ceilin's too tender under here, und a chunk com' by der floor down youst now."

And while Mr. and Mrs. Lawton went below to measure the disaster, Sybil threw her arm about Dorothy's waist, crying: "Oh, won't Mr. Thrall be surprised and delighted with me when he finds I can make a real Morrell fall!"

Then to the tune of "Take back the heart that thou gavest!" she burst into singing:

Take back the bottle thou gavest
What are my bruised knees to thee!

and tossed the arnica bottle at Dorothy, and renewed her everlasting study of Juliet. [Pg 243]

CHAPTER XXI

SEEKING REFUGE FROM THE STORM

The first appearance of the new Juliet was but one week off. Sybil had spent the last fortnight with Mrs. Van Camp, and some very hard work had been done in the quaint old drawing-room, for be it known there are few more difficult undertakings than the proper coaching of an inexperienced girl for the playing of a great part.

The actress who has made her way gradually acquires, all unconsciously, a hundred nameless graces, little tricks of manner, movement or expression, poses, poises, flutterings, the turn of the head or the glance of the eye, and all seem so natural, so spontaneous; but try to teach them to a novice and both coach and pupil will find their work cut out for them.

The process is an unnatural one, and the result is a forced blossom, that, however brilliantly beautiful, has a frail exotic air that makes even admirers wonder if the plant has sufficient strength ever to bloom again.

Stewart Thrall knew perfectly what drudgery coaching meant, and perversely told himself, up to the very last moment, that he should send, in a day or two, to-morrow, next day, for "Mother Mordaunt" (whose home was irreverently termed "The Hatchery," because of the numbers of amateurs she ever had in training there), and place the Crown Princess in her hands, "for drill, [Pg 244] tuition, and discipline," and with insidious self-deception he went so far as to write a note to summon her. Then he caught at the word "drill" to hang his changed opinion on. He did not want her "drilled" out of all the bright spontaneity that was in her now; and, come to think of it, all Mrs. Mordaunt's pupils were trained to the same pattern—they were merely weak copies of herself. He believed, after all, he would undertake the task himself, and he tore to bits the note summoning Mrs. Mordaunt, and wrote instead that line to Sybil, which had caused her so much surprised gratitude, and then remarked casually to Jim Roberts, who sat in the private office with him and carefully polished the metalled gauntlets that belonged to a coat of mail: "I don't know but what young Fitzallen is too inexperienced to do Romeo with a green-girl Juliet. It's rather too great a risk. Maybe I had better go on for it myself, though I suppose I'll scarcely look the part now, even in some new and youthful toggery?"

Roberts looked up from his task, with a queer expression of blended admiration and anger on his face, and answered: "You'll look the part all right, just as well as you ever did, but—what's the use of trying to deceive yourself, for you wouldn't condescend to try to deceive me surely. You know well enough that as long ago as when you telegraphed me to bring Miss Lawton back from the West you had already decided to play Romeo to her Juliet, and I knew it as well as you did, so what's the use?" [Pg 245]

"Indeed! Why, you are becoming clairvoyant! Isn't that what they call the fellow who lies about seeing things that have never occurred? Jim, you're off your base!"

"Easy, Thrall!" answered Roberts, in a low tone. "A sneer more or less doesn't matter much, but we will draw the line at 'lying!' And if I'm off my base no one knows why better than you do!"

With a muttered oath Thrall left the room, but he took the note that summoned Sybil and mailed it himself.

They had worked hard and long in the old-timey drawing-room, for only the very last rehearsals were to be held upon the stage with the full company. Sybil had rehearsed until her head ached, her throat throbbed, and her lips were dry and parched. High-spirited, restless, quick-tempered, she forced herself to docility, and patiently repeated, went back, and began over, bore criticisms with hard-won meekness, and when she received an approving word her tired lips curled into the lovely smile that thrilled her teacher's nerves.

Then her patience, her determination to succeed, her passionate desire to understand the part, added to her keen appreciation of the beauty of the language, all appealed to the artist in him; while her attitude of reverent admiration toward himself touched even while it humiliated him, in that he knew he was not worthy of such reverence. Yet, in some strange way, he seemed to see in her the reincarnation of his own youthful sincerity, passionate ambition, and eager, loving labor, [Pg 246] before the testing fires of life had found so much dross in him; and, with a great wave of tenderness swelling in his heart, he vowed she should not "lose the way," as he had done; that her dainty imaginings, her original ideas, should not be frightened back by sneer or sarcasm; and that her reverent love for the mighty playwright of the ages should not be ridiculed or "guyed" into a mere question of which of his plays had the most money in it.

She had the fire, the magnetism, the imaginative power of the artistic temperament, and, in guarding her from the banalities and the cheap cynicisms that are so deadly in their effect upon

the enthusiastic young beginner, he somehow felt as if he were making reparation for the wrong he had done that younger self, who had hoped for fame, but had been given notoriety instead.

Nor was that the last excuse Thrall found for his willing work in training this young actress. The manager, the money-getter in him, was appealed to also. More and more plainly he saw in this young gentlewoman of the unusual beauty, whose very imperfections were just enough to humanize, to attract, the public—not to repel and chill as absolutely statuesque perfection has a way of doing, a "card" of great value. More and more surely he knew that there was "money in her," and he meant that every dollar she could be made to draw should roll safely into the box-office drawer. And so he told himself that in order to discount the dulled edge of a curiosity gratified she must be taught really to act—to act well. For that was what they would have to rely [Pg 247] upon at the last—beauty and acting combined, when the drawing power of mere novelty was exhausted. Therefore, it was simply good, sound, business tactics to train and explain and repeat —repeat—repeat! and to be very stern sometimes, because a drooping figure and a white, tired face made him long so to gather the weary young body into his arms and whisper: "Rest! poor little queen to be! rest!"

All these reasons for coaching Sybil himself, instead of engaging Mrs. Mordaunt to do it for him, he acknowledged, and if there was yet another one, he ignored its existence until that morning when the first performance was but one week off.

Leslie Galt, the grave young lover of Dorothy, had from the first found a friend in Sybil, and she had been a willing screen for hardly secured hand-pressures at sundry partings; had made swift and fairly reasonable excuses for brief, but to Mrs. Lawton unaccountable, absences from porch or parlor; had given many a vital hint, that he had followed to his profit, and, in consequence, he had fallen into the habit of depending upon her sisterly advice in his love-affairs. "When in doubt, consult your Sybil!" was his way of describing the situation; and on that morning, being in doubt, he had appeared at Mrs. Van Camp's and had sought an interview before work began.

After greetings and a few commonplaces had been exchanged, a slight pause was broken by Sybil saying, briskly: "Brother-to-be! you are evidently on the anxious seat about something, so rise up like a little man and tell me all about what brought you there! Do you know [she cocked her head [Pg 248] to one side in a ludicrous imitation of old Poll], you look like a young person who, having gone and done something he is half sorry for, is now in search of a friend who will brace him up and tell him how wondrous wise he has been?"

Galt laughed rather nervously, rather flatly, and a dismal "Ha! ha!" came in quick response from beneath the sofa.

"There!" the speaker went on; "did you hear that? There's the same clear, mirthful ring in that laugh that yours had just now—so hearty!"

He threatened the girl with the walking-stick he was rolling restlessly across his knee. "Upon my word," he said, "you are wonderfully well named. I believe you are a true descendant of the mighty Cumæan Sybil of old, whose peculiar business methods worried Tarquin of Rome—just as you will in all probability worry Mr. Thrall! Sybil, do you see what that wretched bird is about? He is cutting the buckle off your slipper."

"Go away!" exclaimed she, pushing the ancient torment from her.

"Scratch poor Poll!" hoarsely suggested the bird, cocking his head to one side in just the manner she had been imitating a moment before.

"I won't!" she refused. "I scratched your treacherous old head for half an hour, and had to trim my nails for my trouble! Go away, Poll! Oh, Leslie! take him off, he's getting cross, and he'll bite my skirt full of holes if you don't!" [Pg 249]

And, after some little manœuvring, the green tyrant was induced to clamber laboriously and profanely on to the stick, and was thus carried to Mrs. Van Camp, who cried: "Come to his mamma, then, and stop his naughty damning! and let dear mamma scratch Poll's pretty head!" adding aside to Galt: "It's so odd, he always speaks so much more distinctly when he swears. Just hear how plainly he is damning me now, yet words that I have been trying with all possible care to teach him he gives in such guttural tones that only a loving ear can comprehend them."

"Yes," replied the young man, "it's probably an inherited preference, since it is common to all parrots. Sailors have told me that even the females—who do not talk, you know, save in the exceptional case that makes the rule—even they are capable of saying 'hell!' with apparent appreciation, though they never learn another word."

"Dear me, how interesting!" smiled Mrs. Van Camp, who then sweetly asked: "Are you, by any chance, concerned in the establishment of Sunday-schools in your river town?"

Amid general laughter Leslie returned to Sybil, who gurgled: "Oh, dear boy; never again try to poke fun at my god-mother! But now that Poll has gone, what is the matter?"

"Just this: day after to-morrow is Dorothy's birthday, and——"

"Oh!" murmured Sybil, and drew nearer with brightening eyes. "You want to get a present for her. Well?" [Pg 250]

"I've already got it," said Galt, anxiously, "and now I'm wondering what she will think of it. May I

show it to you, and will you tell me honestly whether I should offer it or get something else?"

She nodded her head, and first he drew from his coat-pocket a cabinet photograph of Mrs. Lawton, which he returned, thanking her for its, to her, mysterious loan. Then he took from its tissue wrapping a locket.

"Oh, how pretty!" cried Sybil. "A 'D' in pearls on one side, and on the other"—she gave him a roguish glance of understanding—"a violet in enamel!"

But his face kept its unsmiling, anxious look. "Open it," he said.

"Is there a picture, Leslie? Oh, I am glad! An empty locket always seems such an absurdity. Oh!" For two pictures were within. She gave a startled glance, and continued, "Mamma! Such a good likeness, too, and—" a pause, and, in a lower tone, she added, "and *your* mother!" For, looking at that fair-haired, gentle-faced woman, one saw at a glance from whom Galt had obtained his steady gray eyes.

"You don't think Dorothy will misunderstand, do you?" he asked. "Yet it has just occurred to me that some people shrink from reminders of, of— Sybil, there is just that one cloud upon my perfect joy that my beloved mother cannot know and love my promised wife!"

Raising big, tear-brimmed eyes to his face she said, gently: "Very likely Dorrie will tell you that she can, for *her* faith is absolutely boundless." [Pg 251]

"God bless her!" whispered Galt.

"Amen! to that," answered her sister. "Leslie," she went on, "your gift is an inspiration! I did not know a man was capable of such delightful sentiment. And Dorothy will be touched to the heart by your pathetic little effort to share your happiness with the dear mother who is absent."

His face cleared. "Thank you!" he said. "I see no one wears lockets at the throat now, so I got this to suspend it from." He rose to bring from his pocket a box. The bell rang, but they did not notice it, and the man going to the door in his ancient and wonderfully cut mulberry livery for once failed to wring surreptitious laughter from the young visitor. The box held a heavy chain bracelet of gold.

"Goodness!" cried Sybil, "don't put that on Dorrie's left arm, or you will break it again!" Then, as he slipped the gifts back into his pocket, she said: "Leslie, dear, they are beautiful! Dorothy will be delighted, and I love you because you are so good to her!" She took his face between her hands, and, reaching up, kissed his cheek, and Stewart Thrall, unannounced, entering the front room, saw her, and stood stock still, while a sick qualm of jealousy drained the color from his face and turned his hands to ice.

Then, like one cruelly wounded by a treachery, he recalled, with fierce anger, those seemingly honest words, "I never had a lover in my life!" and, out of a momentary darkness about him, came the clear voice of Sybil, saying: "You are not looking well this morning, Mr. Thrall." [Pg 252]

Being coldly assured he was quite as well as usual, she went on: "Let me introduce Mr. Galt, of whom I am very proud, because I never had a brother until Dorothy presented me with this one."

The sudden lighting of the new-comer's face, was startling as he turned his brilliant eyes on Galt and crushed his hand in hearty greeting. "Let me offer congratulations," he smiled. "Indeed, you should be doubly congratulated, your position is so much more secure and agreeable as a brother to this young lady than it would have been had she 'been a sister to you.'"

"Oh!" laughed Sybil, "he never gave me a chance to make him that offer! There's no flitting from flower to flower about a Galt! They may be a bit cool and hard, but they are true!"

Thrall winced at the unconscious thrust. She slipped her hand under Leslie's arm, and, giving it a little squeeze, added: "You see, I've been studying up your family records along with those of the Montagues and Capulets."

After a few courteous words the men saluted, and Sybil went on out into the hall with Leslie, to give some final message for Dorothy before saying good-by.

And Thrall walked to a window and leaned his head against the cool glass. He closed his eyes and muttered to himself: "Good God! Good God!" and yet again, in utter helplessness, "Good God!" He recalled that sick jealousy, the almost insensate rage, that had possessed him at the sight of that innocent caress, and said to himself: "It is useless to deny it longer, I love that child blindly, [Pg 253] stupidly, senselessly!" Then he lifted his head quickly, indignantly saying: "No! no! that would mean infatuation—the besotting, mere physical attraction, that men who are not Galts yield to, and repent of so swiftly! No! In her, I love the dear ideal I sought and dreamed of in young manhood. It is the purity, the joyous spirit, the high ambition, the unawakened power of loving, and the beauty—the sullen, smiling, changing beauty—that charms, holds, and fascinates me! Oh, yes! I love her—no doubt left of that. And principally because she has no right in it at all she is becoming the ruling factor of my life. I knew the danger to myself of this daily close companionship; yet that being the devil's plan and he my honored master, I pretended doubt of Mordaunt's skill, and took the task of training into my own hands. And now—well, self-deception being over, I must trust to my powers of dissembling to hide from her the longing love that may only speak through lips dead three hundred years ago. Ah, Will! sweet Will Shakspere! you were ever a warm lover; but, depend upon it, your glowing words will not be the cooler from my

delivery of them!"

He laughed at his own fancy, and Sybil, returning, said: "I'm glad to hear that laugh, Mr. Thrall; for positively, when I saw you first, I thought you looked almost ill. And, see how unconsciously selfish one can be, I was quite aware of a fleeting regret for a lost rehearsal, when my better self came forward in sympathy for you! But you will observe that I thought of my own interests first. Humanity must be very disappointing to its Creator! What on earth is the matter with god-mamma?" [Pg 254]

Mrs. Van Camp, with ringed hands high in air, was summoning them both to come to the extension-room, from whence she distantly chaperoned all their many and prolonged rehearsals. "Come! come quickly!" she cried. "You, neither of you, really appreciate him! And you will doubt my assertions unless you hear him your own selves! Hush! hush!" She lifted a warning finger, and they drew cautiously near to the big sun-flooded window, where, on his perch, standing on one foot, the other curled up into a bluish gray ball, stood Poll, his head on one side, a white film drawn over his vicious old eye, while, in a rasping voice, he said, over and over again: "'Omeo! 'Omeo!"

"Is he not wonderful?" whispered his adoring mistress.

"Why? what?" began Thrall.

But Sybil shook her head warningly, and even while Mrs. Van Camp's eyes flashed ominously at him he understood, and exclaimed, in tones of amazed admiration: "If he is not calling Romeo, I'm a sinner!"

"'Omeo! 'Omeo!" rasped Poll, and Mrs. Van Camp, unable to restrain herself longer, clasped him to her bosom, whereupon he yelled and swore and screeched, and swallowed two buttons from the front of her gown.

"Perhaps they will kill him?" hopefully whispered Thrall.

"Not a bit of it!" laughed Sybil; "they do him good! He has bolted nearly half a string of beads for me since I've been here! Oh, is he not awful?" [Pg 255]

Mrs. Van Camp was finally forced to put him in his cage for punishment, and to quiet him a blanket was being wrapped about the top, when suddenly, with surprising distinctness, he croaked "Dead! dead!" then "'Omeo! 'Omeo!" again. And Mrs. Van Camp, with emotion, pressed Thrall's hands and kissed Sybil, and blessed them for their long rehearsals, that were ending in instructing her dear, dear Polly! And the pair writhed in a very anguish of suppressed mirth, until Mrs. Van Camp went back to her embroidery, and their laughter in the drawing-room could be laid to the account of "acting."

Next day Sybil had been presented to the company, on the stage of the Globe. She was being announced as an amateur, and people were filled with wonder that a young girl could pass from the drawing-room directly to the stage. But her first scene was not over before some knowing smiles and glances were being exchanged, and one of the actresses was saying: "Amateur—drawing-room? Well, she is from the drawing-room, no doubt of that; but she has halted at some other theatre before reaching this one, for she is no amateur!"

"Oh, I don't know!" argued the "old woman," who was, of course, cast for the Nurse. "I find her quite novicey in the 'business' of our scenes."

"That may be," replied the other speaker, a blonde person, referred to by Roberts as "that devil divorcée!" the first term alluding to her malicious temper, the second to the scandalous divorce that preceded her appearance in New York. "It may be that she is not familiar with the 'business' of Juliet, but did you see her awhile ago looking for her boa? The carpenter told her it was hanging across a chair on the 'o. p.' side, and she crossed over instantly to get it? To an amateur the 'o. p.' side would have been Greek. And when something was said about 'the borders,' did you see how quickly she looked up at them? Amateur? Call up the marines to listen to that yarn, but I was not born yesterday!" [Pg 256]

"No, dear!" pleasantly acquiesced the other. "No one who has seen you would make such a charge, I'm sure!"

"Oh, don't be too clever, for your own good! You shouldn't waste such brilliant bon-mots on a mere actress!"

"Merest mere!" interrupted a voice from behind her. "Don't glare so, you'll spoil your beautiful expression. Good Lord!"

For the angry face had suddenly wreathed itself in smiles, and the divorcée advanced with outstretched hand to meet Sybil, who, the scene being over, was hesitating which way to turn.

"Come and sit here by me," she cooed. "Does your throat get dry from long speaking? Mine does." And she offered a beautiful little bonbonnière, saying, "Try these French paste troches, they are delicious."

And the actor, Joseph Grant, who detested her, said, aside to old Mrs. Elmer: "Do you see that? Manice is not getting ready to pump, is she? She'll know that pretty girl's history clear from the very day of her birth before the next act is set." [Pg 257]

"Not if Stewart Thrall is as clever as I think he is. There!" chuckled the old woman. "What did I tell you? Oh, do look at Manice's face!"

For Mr. Thrall had suddenly called out, seeing who was talking to her: "Miss Lawton! Here I am in the parquet. Your aunt would like to speak to you during this wait!"

And no one guessed that the white-haired, upright old person attending Sybil, as watchful chaperon, was really only Mrs. Van Camp's ancient maid, who, at the instigation of Thrall, had been commanded thus to masquerade. And the papers duly noted: "That the young society bud, who had abandoned all social delights for love of art, had arrived promptly at the stage-door, an aristocratic, white-haired lady—a relative—accompanying her, and waiting patiently during the entire rehearsal, thus disposing of the rumor that her family was bitterly opposing the step she was taking."

Truly Thrall was pulling the wires, even the very little wires, for small people must be made to dance as well as great ones, if your ballroom is to present a really animated appearance.

Miss Cora Manice was not in the bill, and her unnecessary presence at rehearsals met with such frowning disapproval from Thrall that she withdrew, but with a furious face that fully presaged, to those who understood, the tempest that burst later on, in that private office, whose secret, shade-hung door was never used. [Pg 258]

The other members of the company were wholly indifferent as to whether the interloper sank or swam. Jim Roberts stood afar off, and watched with burning, eager eyes every movement the young girl made, and his swift anticipation of her slightest wish soon attracted attention and comment; and one day some fellow said: "I believe Jim's gone back on Thrall, at last, and has taken a new master."

"No," replied Joseph Grant, "you mean a new mistress!" and this exquisite joke almost strangled maker and hearer with laughter.

The rehearsals were almost over. Scenery and properties took up much time, and made them very wearying, but there was a delightful break when Thrall made coffee in his office, and with Margaret, the ancient maid, doing propriety, in the corner, he served his "queen to be" with all the skill of a French waiter, and all the tenderness of a mother, while, with a hearty girl's appetite, she disposed of dainty sandwiches, coffee, and fruit—save on that one day when she ran out and gave every blessed sandwich there was to a poor waif whom she saw from the window.

"Why did you not give him money?" Thrall asked.

"I had none," she frankly answered.

"You should have told me, then I would have given him something for you."

She frowned a bit, and answered: "He would not have dared enter any place about here, and I could not put him to the torture of waiting—forgive me!" [Pg 259]

And one day—one threatening day, when gas was burning everywhere, so dark it was—Thrall told himself he could do no more for this creature who had grown so precious in his secret sight. Only one thing troubled his artistic sense: Sybil's Juliet was a trifle too frank—too boyishly honest in her love. The soft confusion, the flushing cheek and drooping eye, that sweetly contradict the open plainness of her speech, were missing. He knew why it was so; and when the artist in him asked if he would have it otherwise, the man, recalling that sick qualm of jealousy, answered: No! no!

Rehearsal being over, Sybil had sent old Margaret home in the carriage that Thrall had hired for them, and had herself turned downtown a few blocks, and had then gone across to a little shop, where stage shoes were to be tried on.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Van Camp will be angry if I leave you, Miss Sybil," the woman had protested. "There's an awful storm coming up, too!"

"Nonsense!" said the girl, who even then had to hold her hat on with both hands, so high was the wind. "Go on, god-mother needs you at once! I'll be home in no time, but I can't leave those shoes another day. Suppose they should be wrong in some way? By-by!" and, laughing, she faced the tearing wind.

Coming from the shop she felt the rain begin to fall. She fairly flew along the streets. Two cars passed without heeding her signal. What should she do? The theatre? She had a right to seek shelter there, surely, and that way she rushed. A sign came hurling through the air! She screamed, and the next moment dashed, damp, chill, dishevelled, into the vestibule. [Pg 260]

At the bang of the great door young Barney, pale under the box-office gas-light, raised his head and looked through the little window, trying to see who was outside, but the darkness was almost that of night, and Sybil, catching her breath in gasps, said: "I beg your pardon, Mr. Barney, I—I have just run in here for shelter—it's awful outside! Don't you know me? I'm Miss—Miss—" She stopped, in confusion. A tall man was stooping to peer out over Barney's shoulder. Those well-

shaped, amazingly brilliant eyes were unmistakable. Then a voice of incredulity, of pleased incredulity, was saying: "It's not Miss Lawton, alone in this fearful storm, surely?"

The door was pulled open, and through the out-streaming light came Stewart Thrall. His overcoat over one arm, and a closely furled umbrella in the hand, whose finger and thumb also held an unlit cigar, told plainly that he was just leaving, that had she been one single moment later she would have found only Barney in the theatre.

Only one moment, but, oh, there are single moments full, replete, and pregnant with possibilities —moments that may bring forth results dire and strange! William Henry Bulkley's one moment had been sufficient for the mad runaway of the big chestnut, and things more terrible than horses may fiercely break away from all restraint in equally brief time.

But Sybil, shaken, breathless, and embarrassed in the dusk, made, unconsciously, a mental, never-to-be-forgotten portrait of Stewart Thrall standing in that informing stream of light— [Pg 261] handsome, debonair, stately of height, and graceful of bearing, and on his face that eager look that made it strangely young.

He held his hand out: "Miss Lawton, is it really you? Why—good heaven, you are wet and cold!" The wind rattled windows, doors, and signs so that she could scarcely hear his words; but the warm pressure of his clasping hand was comforting to her. "Where is your carriage? eh? I can't hear you!"

Something, probably a billboard, fell with a crash against the door, and the girl gave a violent start of terror. Suddenly Thrall turned, still holding her hand fast. He cast his coat, umbrella, and cigar into the office, saying sharply to Barney: "I'm not here—to anyone! You understand?"

Barney looked up inquiringly. Their eyes met fully, and Thrall repeated: "Not to *anyone*!" And, closing the box-office door, he felt for the baize ones leading to the auditorium, pushed one leaf open and entered, drawing Sybil after him by the hand. As it closed he reached up and softly pushed the bolt.

Outside, in the office, Barney stared stupidly, then began a double shuffle, chuckling to himself: "Oh, wait till Manice gets on to this! But one of these days the governor will stand up to her, and then she'll get a pointer on temper that will astonish her, I guess! He's too easy! I wish he'd chuck her out of the company—spiteful, bleached cat!" Undoubtedly a very vulgar-minded boy was Barney.

Inside the red baize doors Sybil was amazed to find almost perfect silence. The auditorium, being [Pg 262] in the very middle of the building, was cut off from outer sounds. Even the wild shriek of the wind was greatly softened. The darkness seemed at first complete, but the accustomed eye could see a faint grayness at the stage end opposite them.

A row of open French boxes extended across the back of the lower circle. Thrall laid his hat in a chair in one of them as he passed, and still leading Sybil, said, in a cheerful, matter-of-course tone, intended to quiet any possible uneasiness of mind: "This way, Miss Lawton! Don't be afraid, there are no steps. The register is right in this corner, and there is at least enough heat on to dry your damp clothing. It would be a pretty serious thing, my young lady, for you to catch cold at this late hour. There, you can feel a little hot air, can't you?"

The building now fairly trembled under the force of the gale, and Thrall, with a tightening of his fingers on hers, asked, reproachfully: "In God's name, child, what induced you to face a storm like this? Tell me."

But in that warm, dark silence words would not come easily. She murmured something about "god-mamma's needing Margaret's services," paused, added a confused assurance that her "stage shoes had proved satisfactory," and became mute.

The empty auditorium was vast, the white linen hangings, draping boxes and dress-circle, were mysterious as the swaying mosses of a Southern swamp. A sense of isolation came upon her, of distance from the world. She did not seem to think consecutively, but in broken, fragmentary, [Pg 263] foolish bits. She wondered why Mr. Thrall was so silent. Was it because—. She wondered if her dress was drying all around evenly—if her boots would spoil from the heat—her mother had thought them expensive, and—and how many nerves and pulses did one girl carry about with her? And why need they all quiver and beat at the same time?

She drew her hand gently from Thrall's, but he took up the other that was still in a wet and clammy glove. Silently, deftly unbuttoning and peeling it off, he softly chafed the little member. Sybil drew a long, slow breath—what was it that troubled her?

The darkness seemed to hide something—secret, sweet! A strange, evanescent perfume seemed to have been left out there by beauty, wealth, and fashion! In the mingling odors of rice-powder, orris, violet, and fine tobacco in the close warm air there was a sensuous suggestion of eyes and smiles, of whispers and pressed hands! The potent perfume of human love was all about her! She moved restlessly. "I—the heat! my head!" she whispered, and drew away from him.

He put his foot out and closed the register. "I—I must go now," she slowly added, when there came a sound—a steady, loud sort of even roar, and Thrall knew a very deluge of icy rain must be descending upon the city to be heard so plainly there.

"Go?" he queried, gently. "Go? Why, my child, you could not stand on your feet a moment—the gale would dash you to the earth. Stay here, where you are safe."

The silence closed about them again, yet she vaguely felt there was no calm in it—it seemed only dormant. Then dimly it came to her to ask Mr. Thrall to let her go to the box-office to wait, when suddenly the building shook as a toy house might have done, and there came a deafening, rumbling crash above their very heads, it seemed, though truly it was a chimney falling above the stage roof, and Sybil's one wild scream of terror was smothered on Thrall's breast! [Pg 264]

"Don't, don't, my—!" he whispered, hoarsely, holding her trembling hand to his lips and covering it with kisses. "Don't shiver so! 'Twas nothing! You are quite safe—quite safe! Sybil—Princess! I'd shelter you in my arms, and guard you with my life—always! if I might! if I might!"

His arms were about her. The dull roar of the rain was like the roaring from a distant world—they were alone—utterly alone—in the dimness warm and fragrant. She was all unstrung and weak from fright. His words seemed half real, half dreamed. She raised her head—she put two impotent little hands against his breast.

"Please!" she gasped. "I am not frightened now! I—" A strange lassitude was upon her. A door somewhere banged heavily—she shivered as at a blow! Her head sank back upon his breast. He bent over her, his face all passion-pale, his heavy, drooping lids betraying their girl-like length of lashes.

"Sybil!" he breathed.

Her eyes, wide and startled, met his. "Sybil!" he entreated. "Sweetheart!" His lips met hers in one long, tender kiss, and the house rocked in the fury of the gale! [Pg 265]

CHAPTER XXII

PREPARING THE PIT

For some time the question troubling the Lawton family had been how and where to establish Sybil for the term of her engagement at the Globe. Returning to Woodsedge after performances was not to be thought of. No, a residence in the city was an absolute necessity.

Mrs. Lawton indignantly wondered if Sybil Van Camp had ever realized that a sort of deputy-maternity devolved upon a god-mother—a term that had taken Leslie Galt, who was sharing the family council, out of the room in search of a handkerchief in his overcoat pocket. At which Mrs. Lawton gloomily expressed a fear of his "becoming a fussy old man in time, because," said she, "Leslie had a handkerchief in his breast pocket that might easily have served his purpose. Now, Dorothy," she continued, "take a mother's advice, and check at once any symptom of faddishness that appears in him, or he'll have you in heelless shoes or on a milk diet, or something of that sort, before you know it. But really, dear, you shouldn't interrupt. [Leslie returned to his seat here.] The question at this moment is, what is to become of your unfortunate sister; for though she has cast in her lot with 'mere players,' and has rejected the comfort and sweet privacy of home life, it does not follow that she is prepared to pass the rest of her life upon the unsheltered, stony streets of the city. What is the matter with you, Leslie? You are not in need of another handkerchief, are you? As I was saying when someone interrupted me, I doubt if Sybil Van Camp ever had any idea of the duties of a god-mother." [Pg 266]

"Rattle," counted Sybil on her fingers, "silver mug, corals——"

"Given long ago!" triumphed Dorothy.

"Renouncing the devil for you," went on Sybil, "and seeing that you knew creed, prayers, commandments, and church catechism——"

"Which she didn't do!" cried Mrs. Lawton; "for I have heard your father bribing you many a time to learn and repeat them to him. And now, if she had any appreciation of the duties devolving upon her, would she not open her home to her goddaughter, and shelter her for a brief period from the perils of the city?"

"Upon my word, mamma," laughed Sybil, "if you keep on in that strain I'll drop down on all fours and beg for a bone. Anyone would think you were speaking of a homeless dog. God-mother Van Camp has done more for me than I can ever repay, and she has invited me to stay in her house during my engagement, but it is not to be thought of. Why, papa, dear, I am now quite turning the household topsy-turvey by the irregularity of my hours. Rehearsals may be short, or they may be long. The cook gets cross, and god-mamma gets anxious. Her daily life is regulated like a railroad schedule for precision and exactitude of time. Then, when acting once begins, the watching for my late return at night would be a cruel penance to god-mamma and ancient Margaret and the butler Murphy, who is the greatest old woman of the lot. No, I can't think of so desecrating that last retreat of all the Knickerbocker proprieties; but, in a boarding-house——" [Pg 267]

"A barracks!" said Leslie. "Oh, I know all about boarding-houses and their keepers, from the black-bugled lady with ancestors down to the loud-voiced, false-fronted person who makes her

husband eat in the kitchen, and I tell you a boarding-house is quite out of the question for you."

"That's just what Mr. Thrall said," eagerly interrupted Sybil, "when the matter was mentioned in his presence. And he knows a woman, whom he has employed for years as a wardrobe woman and sort of general dresser, to help those ladies who have no maids of their own. She is a widow, and she owns—mortgaged, of course—one of those old-fashioned, two-and-a-half-story, red-brick basemented houses——"

"Take a breath, Syb!" laughed Dorothy.

"That's a gem," gravely asserted Galt, "that descriptive sentence is. Spoken rapidly it does leave the impression that the widow is mortgaged and a doubt as to the red brick reaching beyond the basement. But when one writes it all out, and punctuates carefully——"

"Leslie Galt, my young brother! Will you remember that you are still on probation? Final vows have not yet been administered. Though under instruction, you have not yet been admitted into [Pg 268] the Lawton community for life!"

"That's about the only thing I do remember at all clearly these days," answered Galt, smiling meaningly at Dorothy.

But John Lawton rumpled his thin hair, and said, anxiously: "Let's get back to that mortgaged house, daughter—it's most train time for you, dear."

"Well," went on Sybil, drawing her father's hand about her neck as she spoke, "her name is—is, oh, something with an S, Mrs.—Stow—Stover—Stine—Sty—Stivers! that's it! Mrs. Jane Stivers—odd, isn't it, papa? And she——"

"My dear child," remonstrated Mrs. Lawton, somewhat wearily, "why will you not adopt my method of remembering names? It's so embarrassing at times to have a cognomen escape you, just when you feel it, too, on the tip of your tongue, but can't get it off. Now, I always associate a name with a thing or an action or an idea, and the result is I never have to go skipping through the alphabet as you and Dorothy do. I recall the case of Mrs.—Mrs.—dear me! Mrs.—you know, girls, to whom I refer—that woman I disliked so. I like most people, but she was underbred—at One Hundredth Street? You must remember her perfectly. I know at the time I associated her name with something—er—er, something she hated. Now, what did that woman hate? Her husband was bandy—polite enough, but bandy, and he had a cross eye! Something she hated—now what?" [Pg 269]

"Perhaps she hated anything very straight," laughed Dorothy. "I think I should under the circumstances!"

"There!" broke in Mrs. Lawton. "What did I tell you? Straight—she hated anything straight, because her name was Crook! And Mr. Crook was cross-eyed! It's infallible, my system! But do get on, Sybil, or really you will lose that train!"

"Well, papa!" said the girl, in a quivering voice, "Mrs. Stivers's house is—Mr. Thrall says—fairly near the theatre. It is quiet as a church, and in a most respectable quarter. She has been in the habit of renting the second floor to student lodgers. She has never kept regular boarders, but Mr. Thrall thinks she might, for a few dollars increase in the rent, take me in, instead, and do for me. He uses so many Englishy expressions in ordinary conversation. He says her age, character, and habits would recommend her, and another advantage would be that I could go home nights under her wing, without troubling Mr. Roberts for escort, who lives in the opposite direction. The parlor, he says, is given over to horse-hair. Mrs. Stivers was married during the mahogany reign of terror, you see. But I could do what I liked in my own room, to modernize. And, mamma, he proposes, as she can't come from her work out here, to be interviewed by you, that you authorize Mrs. Van Camp [Letitia straightened up in her chair] to receive her and talk the matter over, and then to report to you for your decision."

Mrs. Lawton closed her eyes, and said, impressively: "A most sensible suggestion from a man très comme il faut!" [Pg 270]

To Sybil's questioning eyes Mr. Lawton answered: "Yes, dear! That has a promising sound. What do you think, Leslie?"

"I agree with you, sir, if the woman is kindly disposed. The fact of her working in the theatre should be a distinct advantage. The question is, will she board as well as lodge her guest? For even if a restaurant were next door Sybil is far too pretty a girl to pass in and out unnoticed."

"So very like me," breathed Letitia. "It's the Bassett coloring, I think, that attracts the public eye."

"Dorothy!" exclaimed Sybil, turning from adjusting her hat before the dim old mirror, "my descendants shall rise up and call you blessed, for in the fine art of selecting a brother for your only sister you take the cake. Oh, papa! I beg your pardon! I—I meant she wins the laurel!"

"Sybil!" moaned Mrs. Lawton, distressfully, "I don't wish to rebuke you at the very moment of leave-taking, but, my very dear child, you must really check your tendency toward reckless speech. To allude to your descendants when you are not yet even engaged is not far from indelicacy; and, Dorothy, causeless laughter is rightly esteemed a proof of bad manners. Good-by, my dear; say to Mrs. Van Camp I am quite unable to go to the city in this cold weather, and must

therefore ask her to act for me in the case of Mrs.—er, I don't think I quite caught the name? Eh? oh, Stivers—yes, I shall easily remember that by connecting it with a saying contradicted."

"A what, mamma?" laughed the girls. [Pg 271]

"Stivers?" repeated Galt, meditatively, "a 'saying contradicted!' I can't find the connection. It's a mystery—impenetrable!"

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Lawton, "it's very simple. You need just say to yourself 'not worth a stiver'—there's your saying; but she owns a house, there's your contradiction, and you have the name as quickly as possible. Yes, I shall always remember the name Stivers!"

"If," slowly put in John, "if you don't happen to forget 'the saying.'"

And good-by being said, with arms about waists the sisters held in the hall one of those secret conclaves over only heaven and themselves knew what, but without which they were never known to part for more than twenty-four hours.

Then with her moon face all red with heat and hurry Lena rushed out with a package of hot cookies, crying: "I bake dem cake youst by der train time, und dere blazes hot! But I tie 'em mit a long string so you don't com' burnt by der hants!"

Mrs. Lawton came to the door and indignantly demanded: "What folly and presumption is this, Lena Klippert? Retire at once and take your obnoxious offering with you!"

"Den you don' vant dem cookies, my Miss Lady? You tink I com' by der cheek, uf I bring 'em here?" poor Lena quavered, shamefacedly.

But Sybil fitted the looped string over her finger and flashed a radiant smile at the faithful little German drudge, and, dangling the package in the air, quoted: [Pg 272]

"'This little pig went to market!' Just wait till to-night, Lena, when I'm alone in my room, and the little pig will have cookies, eh?"

"Ja! ja!" nodded and smiled Lena. "You com' make very fine little pig, Miss Sybbils; sometimes you can com' black, but ven you smiles, your lips youst curl up like a flower!"

And, amid general laughter, Sybil departed for the city with Leslie doing escort duty, while John and Dorothy Lawton received an informing lecture upon the structure, quality, and quantity of brain to be found in the low-class Germans that nicely filled up the rest of their afternoon.

At Mrs. Van Camp's house Sybil's return was followed almost immediately by the announcement from the wearer of the mulberry livery of: "A person—an elderly female person—to see you, ma'am; by appointment, she claims, ma'am. Show her up? Yes, ma'am. Hem! if you'll excuse the boldness—Mr. Poll's in the library, and he do be swearing awful, beyond anythink, ma'am. What for is it? Why, ma'am, someone—I suppose it's the young lady, ma'am—put a shaving-glass in his cage, and he's been cussin' of he'self ever since he laid eyes on it. Shall I be carryin' him to the basement, or covering him up? I don't know. Yes, ma'am, I'll take him down as you say." And a few moments later he returned, haughtily ushered in Mrs. Jane Stivers, and retired.

Sybil, entering by the opposite door, saw a thin, elderly woman, whose dark hair sprinkled with gray and banded smoothly down over each ear, whose small, dark eyes, whose thin, pale-lipped, [Pg 273] closely closed mouth, and long, drooping nose spelled as plainly as letters could the word—discreet. Her black gown and unspeakably respectable bonnet, her thick but plain cloak, her neat cashmere gloves, were all prim adjuncts to that picture of *discretion*. She stood in true servant-like attitude, eyes down and hands crossed at the exact waist-line; and as Sybil reached her god-mother's side that lady, raising her glasses to look at the stranger, said: "Mrs. Stivers, I wish to—why! why! you're Martin—you are surely Jane Martin?" and sat staring.

"Yes, Madam Van Camp," she replied, "I am Jane that was in your sewing-room three years and more. I didn't think you'd remember a servant's face so long, so I didn't tell Mr. Thrall I'd been in your service. My husband was a boss carpenter in a theatre, and that took me there. Me being a good needle-woman, I got work in the wardrobe, and gradually learned the business thorough-like; and when my husband died, as I wanted to hold on to the house, I began taking lodgers as well as working at the theatre, so as to pay off the mortgage some time, I do hope, ma'am."

Both women sighed sympathetically as they listened to Mrs. Stivers's calm and self-controlled statement of her financial and professional situation, little dreaming that the oppressive mortgage existed only in the imagination of the undemonstrative widow, who found it too powerful a lever in raising the rent of rooms, in raising her salary, and in raising the hats of [Pg 274] compassionate observers—to be willingly abandoned.

But though the house mortgage had been cancelled long ago, she was then by way of secretly placing a mortgage upon her own character for upright honesty, for sincerity, for honor. True, there was no overt agreement to dupe a young girl and to circumvent her friends; yet if she made no slip, trip, or blunder in this matter intrusted to her, she surely knew that at its end Stewart Thrall, who guided, governed, and controlled her, would hold first mortgage on her character, since by tacit, unspoken agreement she would become a living surveillance, a personified treachery, while still deceptively wearing the livery of prim respectability and honest labor.

Now, Mrs. Van Camp asked the woman to be seated; expressed regret for her bereavement, and,

because of the excellent impression Jane Martin had made upon her in the past, looked with unusually lenient eyes upon Jane Stivers of the present, and accepted readily her statements, and trustingly saw in her rectitude, her intelligence, and her respectful and deferential manner the most desirable sort of combination—landlady, maid, and sheep-dog.

When terms came to be considered, though they seemed surprisingly easy, Sybil nervously checked Mrs. Van Camp's acceptance of them, saying that her salary hardly justified such an outlay.

"Oh, Miss Lawton, if you'll pardon the interruption," said Jane Stivers, "your salary will be quite a different thing when you begin playing Juliet. Anyone would know that, as a mere matter of [Pg 275] course. But besides that, when Mr. Thrall did me the service of mentioning this matter, he honored my little home with a call, and as he was going he puts on his hat and says: 'And I must have now a bit of a business talk with our little Royal Princess'—that's you, Miss; theatrical people are great for tagging folks with names, be you high or be you low—you're bound to get a tag; even I, miss, have been 'Jane Penny' ever since some rattle-brain found that Stiver was Dutch for a penny."

Sybil recalled her mother's old saying, "Not worth a stiver," and laughed, while Jane went on.

"Yes, ma'am, he said he must have a little talk with the Royal Princess and add a cipher to her salary, so she could settle down with a quiet mind, free for Juliet alone."

And on the strength of that report Mrs. Van Camp accepted the offered terms, but advised Sybil to run over with "Martin," as she would call her, "to look at the apartments and ascertain if there was a sun exposure for at least one room; and whether the drains were all right, and the gas-pipes innocent of dangerous leakage."

And Sybil—the wish being father to the thought—declared the house quite perfect. Mrs. Lawton was notified by letter, and while awaiting her answer a "lightning-change artist" had been at work upon walls and floor of the front room. The drab and blue horror of the wall had become a clear primrose yellow with white enamelled picture-rails. The floor being of old, badly matched [Pg 276] pine-boards, and there being no time for painting or staining, was completely covered with a dull grayish-green carpet, with pure white rugs before sofa, writing-desk, etc.; and with flowing white curtains with broad primrose ribbon-ties and a white-framed rocker with cushion of grayish green, flowered over with pale primroses. These changes made so magical an effect that Sybil, coming on the third day to take possession, stood astounded.

"Yes, ma'am," evenly admitted Jane Stivers, "it was a bit of a rush, and I could not manage to get the second room done so quickly. The expense? Oh, I have been saving up for months for the express purpose of doing up my rooms."

But Sybil was amazed at the artistic taste shown here; it was in such strange contrast to the black hair-cloth, the shiny white and gold paper, the wax flowers of the parlor, that yet evidently filled Jane's soul with pride.

"Whom did you advise with, Mrs. Stivers?" she asked, as her fingers stroked the flowered cushion.

"No one. I did it all myself." Then, as a quick side-glance caught the unbelief on her lodger's face, she added: "No, I don't know, on second thought, but what I did get a hint about the color you would be likely to favor. I recall now that Mr. Thrall remarked, seeing that paper hanging in the dealer's window: 'What a fine background for some dark-haired woman.' So I just caught the idea, as you may say."

"You are a very clever woman, I see," answered Sybil, who went joyously about her unpacking, [Pg 277] looking every ten minutes from the window for Dorothy, who was coming with home photographs, Lena's personally constructed pillow-sham with a large blue cotton "S. L." worked in the middle, a beautiful old paper-knife from papa, a silver powder-box from Leslie, and two pretty but broken fans from mamma, who thought they would decorate a room nicely, giving quite a little studio-like touch—all to be used in "homing the rooms," as Dorothy put it.

Godmamma Van Camp sent three really precious old engravings that Dorothy, with hat still on, went about rapturously holding up against the clear yellow wall, smacking her young lips as though she were tasting something.

The most exciting moment of the girls' day was when going into the second room Dorothy pointed to a corner cabinet and said: "What's that, Syb?"

"What's what?" asked that person from near the bottom of the trunk Jane was waiting to remove to the attic.

"That in the corner?"

Sybil rose, red and hot, and looked while Jane pulled the trunk out. Then she exclaimed: "Why, that was not there when I came to look at the rooms first!" She went over to it. A small visiting-card was attached to the key—the card of Stewart Thrall. She opened the cabinet door and revealed a coffee outfit. Two cries of delight arose; alcohol was sent for—the picnic was on! [Pg 278]

In Africa when a creature is too mighty for the hunters, the wily natives contrive a great trap—they dig a deep pit, and then cover it over with frail green boughs and grasses, until it looks like

the rest of the green matted ground about it. They are careful, too, to place this trap in the neighborhood of some rushing river or some stilly pool where in the moonlight or at earliest flush of dawn the great creature must go to lap the cooling water. Then, when it has crashed through into helpless captivity, the small cunning enemy may work their will upon it.

Now, the strange thing is—this cruel and treacherous practice is not confined to Africa. Sometimes pits are dug before young feet and carefully hidden beneath boughs of friendship and flowers of love. Right here in our great city, if we listen closely, we may hear the crashing fall of the victim! [Pg 279]

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WOMAN IN THE BOX

At the Globe Theatre they were settling down to a long and brilliant run. Thrall had staged the old play splendidly, costumed it royally, rehearsed it to exact precision of movement, and cast it with such knowledge, such consideration for the requirements of each character that the fiery Tybalt, the stately Prince, the benignant Friar Laurence, and the grotesque Peter were not more judiciously placed than the Apothecary, Gregory, or the Page. "Romeo and Juliet" had "caught the town"; for once the matinée girl had two idols in the same theatre. Never, never had Thrall been so raved over. In his desire to make himself look as youthful as possible for the early acts, he had permitted the Lefebvres to costume him in white, from his cap and floating ostrich plume down to his shoes; but shoes with yellow leathered heels, cloak lined with a golden yellow satin, that reappeared in such trunk puffings and love-knots of yellow lustre that all suggestion of coldness was lost in extreme richness and delicacy. Indeed, in grace and beauty and extravagance, he was the ideal courtly young popinjay of Verona—the idolized only son and heir of the mighty family of Montague.

And Juliet? Truly they were a pair to joy the eye of poet or of painter! From the moment when she appeared upon the scene and the laughing mockery of her "How now! who calls?" to the Nurse, had changed into the respectful "Madam, I am here!" to her mother, the public had been enslaved by the vividness of the dark and changeful beauty of her girlish face. [Pg 280]

For Thrall's was the artificial youth of the wig, the grease paint; of skilful costuming and brilliant acting; a youth that does not care to come quite down to the footlights. But Sybil was so young that even some of the dear gaucheries of the still growing girl showed faintly in her and made tender tears start to some very worldly eyes; therefore but little was expected from her in the way of acting. So, when at the end of the first act Juliet learns from the Nurse that the young masker is really a Montague, her moaning words,

> "My only love sprung from my only hate;
> Too early seen unknown, and known too late!"

were given in tones so helpless and amazed, and she stood so dazed and motionless under the shock of her discovery, that with a great roar of applause the audience hailed the actress in her!

Sybil had given much thought to her part, and she had advanced some ideas of her own now and then when Thrall was teaching her the "business" of the play, as, for instance, in the potion scene. The Juliets generally rave and wildly scream the line:

> "As with a club, dash out my desperate brains!"

[Pg 281]

and, if they have strength left, scream louder still the

> "——Stay, Tybalt, stay!—"

and then, having swallowed the potion, declare it has

> "——chilled me to the heart!"

that their "senses fail" them, etc., but still in fullest voice cry they:

> "Oh, Romeo! Romeo!"

and collapse.

When this was being explained Sybil asked gravely, but with dancing eyes: "Where were the rest of the Capulet family that night, I wonder? Such a dreadful row would bring the entire household, maids and stable-boys included, to the rescue. I thought this potion-taking was a secret between the Friar, Romeo, and Juliet? I believed she was half suffocated with the horror of the scenes she conjured up, and gasped the words out. Then that scream would be just as effective, I should think, if she fell on her knees near the bed and stifled her shrieks in the pillows or the bed-clothing. Would not the suppressed, almost whispering, voice add to the sense of secrecy—of danger?"

And Thrall, whenever it was possible, permitted her small innovations, was even proud of them, as evidences of her natural ability. And so it came about that this new Juliet had a tang of

originality about her that was delightful to the old theatre-goer; while the remarkable appreciation of the public for sheer physical beauty was shown night after night in the rounds of [Pg 282] applause it bestowed, one after another, before a line was spoken by the ill-fated lovers as they were "discovered" in Juliet's chamber.

Thrall had taken his idea in part from a picture he had seen abroad. The balcony of Juliet's wide-open window, all swathed in vines, lay before the audience. The silken ladder, plainly seen between the tubbed oranges, dangled from the ledge; the room in some disorder; the bed-curtains drawn close; low burnt candles on the dressing-table; Juliet with feet thrust into small Turkish mules, all free from pearls or ornament of any kind—a sort of idealized robe de chambre, white, trailing voluminously, frothed with lace, its open wing-like sleeves touching the floor, fell free from chin to foot, while all the dark mass of hair tumbling riotously over shoulders and clouding about her level, tragic brows suggested the new dear freedom of the nuptial chamber.

In the picture, then, that the public loved, Romeo, close cap on head, long travelling cloak depending from his shoulders—being under the ban of the law—was secretly about to leave his few hours-made bride. Out on the balcony, with right foot on the silken ladder, he rested the left bent knee upon the balcony's ledge. With right arm aloft he steadied himself by holding to the vines above, while with his left arm he crushed the slender, white-robed figure close. Upon his breast her face was resting, with maddening lips and glowing eyes uplifted, her round young arms wreathing his neck; the warm, soft hair flowing over his hand and arm, seeming to him [Pg 283] magnetic, alive, tingling!

So he stood, a gracious shape, with regular fine features, with heavy amorous lids and sweeping black lashes that, downcast, helped to soften the almost savage love burning in the blue depths of his bold eyes.

No more perfect picture of physical beauty and passionate, romantic love could be imagined, and it was nightly received with admiring applause, beneath which his whisper came to her: "My beloved! my beloved!"

And her eyes would sink and all her throat flush red, for she had lived a lover's life-time during that one storm-shaken kiss—and she understood!

Others, too, there were who, though they heard no whispered word, saw the lowered lids and moving lips of Thrall, and, knowing him of old, guessed the rest.

And Roberts groaned and Manice was so like a spitting cat that poor Jim said wearily one night: "Look out, Thrall! I know the wrong side of woman pretty well, and that bleached friend of yours is going to play you a trick before long—either you or—or—" He could not force himself to speak the name, but looked so piteously at the manager that Thrall nodded, answeringly: "All right, Jim! all right! She can try all the tricks she likes on me! The—the other person's safe enough—they don't come in contact, you know! Why, you're all to pieces, and imagine things!" [Pg 284]

"She's dangerous, I tell you!" persisted Jim.

"She's a coward!" contemptuously replied Thrall. "Besides, if you must know, I've succeeded in shipping her. She's to be starred in a comedy next season. Jake Huntley takes her out."

"Humph!" said Jim, "that must cost you something?"

"Well, yes! But better pay your piper quietly when your dance is over, and not stop to count your pennies. I'm mighty lucky to get rid of a firebrand so peaceably."

"You look out, Thrall!" repeated Jim, nervously. "Don't you see that's unnatural conduct for her? She is laying a trap for you—look out, I say!"

"Oh, come out and take a nip of something. You want bracing—come on!" But in a fortnight's time Thrall saw Roberts's fears justified.

Miss Manice, enraged by her "release"—theatrical synonym for "dismissal"—even when profiting most by the managerial generosity, was making secret use of that coward's weapon, the anonymous letter, and each foreign mail day was watched for eagerly, and Thrall's face studied covertly with treacherous feline eyes that sought there some reflex pain or fear from the wounds she was dealing to another—until at last she was rewarded.

Sybil was living in a sort of trance. Stewart Thrall had become her only law. This great success she accepted as a direct gift from him. She had been so helplessly poor, friendless! He, only, had discovered some talent in her, and she had been at first ashamed because she was dependent [Pg 285] upon him for all the means of making anything of herself until—until, oh, pride! oh, joy! wonderful! inexplicable! he loved her! Then all was changed. She could go to him in every difficulty—she could accept help, instruction, everything, without thought of shame. Before, she had simply regarded him as the master of a beautiful art, as a stern and exacting teacher, whose approval was hard to win—until love came to glorify and lift her up to the high throne of his heart.

And so absolute, so unquestioning was her faith and pride and trust, that she had as yet no thought at all of shame or of wrong done, but breathed the incense of public worship and read and re-read her printed praises, and saw the turning heads in the street, the nudging elbows, heard the swift whisper: "There she is—there's Sybil Lawton!" and all day long dreamed of that

moment on the balcony when they two were as alone as though they stood upon an island and the applause was surf thundering an accompaniment to his passion-choked words.

It was a double intoxication—that of both mind and heart. For a little space her life was pure joy, without one clouding thought of—*after*; without conscious knowledge of the envy and calumny, the conflict and detraction going on about her. Occasionally she heard allusions to the "Missus," as when some one would "wonder how the Missus would like this or that," and once or twice she had intended to ask Jane Stivers whether it was a nickname or just a slang term. But what did it matter—what did anything matter?—save to win the approbation of Stewart Thrall, and consequently the public. [Pg 286]

And Thrall, spoiled by the world, looking back along the twenty arid years between them, saw dead passions cast aside like so many outworn gloves; knew the price of every illegitimate whim, and had seen his own danger. Yet instead of flying from it he had trusted to the strange new desire he felt to help, to guard, to advance the interests of another, and now he found himself dominated by a great passion, such a one as none who knew him gave him credit for.

Jim Roberts writhed miserably, crying: "She thinks he loves her! Great God! See her worshipping eyes! But it's not love with him—it's the joy of the pursuit; damn him! Why, oh, why do good women always love such men? Even if I were a man instead of a miserable wreck, just trembling to the fall—my reverent worship, my humble, waiting, devoted love would stand no chance against him or one like him! But why?"

Poor Jim did not know that it is the bold man, who, not restrained by deep respect, pushes past the reverent waiting one, and speaking first, is first loved; and worthiness all unconsidered!

But now he judged Thrall from his conduct in the past and groaned to himself: "He will leave her, just as he did my little Bess—not so soon, perhaps. This girl is many-sided and fascinating, and will not pall so soon, but the change will come. Not to her, though—Heaven bless her! She's as true as steel. Hot and fierce of temper if much tried, but loyal for life! No, the change will be in [Pg 287] him. But when he puts her away from him—I'll put him away from the world he ko-tow's to so devotedly! I will, I swear it! in spite of threatening chair or noose! How cleverly he played his cards in placing the poor child under the 'protection'—God be merciful to the protected!—of that smug-faced, lynx-eyed hypocrite, Stivers, who would sell her soul for money! Had he really wanted Miss Lawton guarded, guided, and watched over, why did he not place her with old Mrs. Elmer—as good a woman and as true a lady as ever lived? But no, she is not a servant; she could not be dismissed or sent away on conveniently important matters of business. Sometimes I think Mrs. Elmer begins to suspect Thrall of a new treachery to the Missus, whom she is really fond of, because they are both English, I suppose. And I can see how sad the good old actress's face is as she watches the by-play between manager-actor and his beautiful young 'find.' But no matter what she may think, there'll be no scandal of her starting. And so far Sybil Lawton's own frankness has been her perfect concealment. Her immeasurable admiration of his 'manly grace and fine eyes,' her unstinted gratitude for his 'teaching and help,' are expressed openly, fervently, and as yet cause only concealed amusement. But Cora Manice is not deceived. Jealous eyes are as sharp as they are cruel. I should know, for my own show me many torturing things that other people are quite blind to; and when her sugary words of compliment became but [Pg 288] vehicles for wounding sneer and cutting criticism, Thrall's cold anger and his expressed desire that Miss Lawton should not associate further with her told her spiteful catship all there was to tell. And if she does not drag this poor girl's name into a scandal, it will not be for want of stealthy trying. She dare not antagonize Thrall openly. If she did, her chance of starring would soar some hundred feet higher than 'Gilderoy's kite.' But oh, poor little girl! your beauty and your genius, like the bloom and perfume of the flower, act as lures to the roving, inconstant seeker of nectar. Your life will be spoiled—if it be not already. Why could Stewart Thrall not leave you alone? You would have made your way slowly, but surely and naturally. But it's no use to speculate now on what might have been. Thrall, who finds it difficult to say 'no' to anyone, could not say it to himself to save his immortal soul from burning fire! And so he wins your dear love, and by and by he will cast it away, and then my beautiful—I'll——"

Jim laughed unsteadily; his pale eye had a greenish animal glare. "I'm a mere wreck—a poor broken-down, drunken actor; and yet it's curious how often it happens that the shaking, unaccustomed hand sends in the killing shot!"

But Stewart Thrall loved Sybil with a difference. His life had become a drear, monotonous triviality. He had been sick to death of those brief amours that ring truest to the sound of gold. Love had so long degenerated into a coarse appetite that it had at last become veritable dead-sea [Pg 289] fruit to him. But this little girl had thrilled him into life again, had aroused his ambition, touched his heart to tenderness and respect and love—real love, that made him try to be the man she thought him, that made him shake with fear lest she find him unworthy—as he knew himself to be. His passion was so adorned with poetry and grace and charm, so surrounded with every illusion his intellect could invent, that a wiser than Sybil Lawton might well have been swept unquestioningly into his arms.

He knew the abyss he faced. He knew there was that "afterward," but he had trusted blindly to his own powers of concealment—to his self-control. Stewart Thrall's self-control! Truly, the devil has many a jest offered him in all gravity!

But right or wrong—and it was all very wrong—he loved her with heart and brain, and being what he was, the immediate moment was sufficient. He was careful of the conventions, but so far as he

dared he surrounded his Princess, his beloved, with the enchantments of luxury. Her rooms were bowers of flowers (they bore various cards on arrival), rare books, precious bibelots; but his fierce jealousy denied her a living pet. And in this fool's paradise they were walking, their feet among the grasses and the flowers, their beautiful mad heads high in the clouds, when the curtain rose on the play one night.

The crowded house watching for Juliet's coming, at her laughing "How now, who calls?" broke into welcoming applause, which continued so long that she was forced to acknowledge the [Pg 290] greeting. As she turned again and faced her mother, Lady Capulet, she saw a woman in the stage-box. She was alone. She leaned forward a little and looked intently, piercingly straight into her face, and Sybil noticed that the woman's hand resting on the box ledge clenched itself hard.

Why, she could not have told, but at that movement her heart gave a frightened bound, and she was glad to get off the stage. She found herself strangely nervous during the balcony scene, but she could not see the strange woman from that side, and was happily forgetting her. But no sooner was she in line with the box again than its occupant fixed her as a basalisk might. No matter what went on, no matter who was speaking, those slowly moving pale-blue eyes with their whity lashes followed her, measuring her height, movements, her very heart-throbs, it seemed to the puzzled, distressed girl. She felt that there was something threatening, inimical, in the very air about her. When the chamber scene began, as she stood on the balcony with Romeo, she was instantly aware of the new rigid clasp of his arm, of the pallor about his mouth, and the sternness that shone in his erstwhile amorous eyes. Sensitive and quick, she translated these signs into disapproval of her work; her nervousness must have made her lose some point, blur some delicate passage or slur over some all-important sentence, she thought, and she tightened her arms about his neck, and whispered with dark eyes wide, like a pleading child: "Master, are you [Pg 291] vexed? Is my work ill-done?" The rigid arm grew flexible and drew her close. The stern eyes fell to the level of her glance. "It's not negligence," she went on, "it's that woman with the cold, pale eyes—she frightens me!"

He whispered swiftly, "Pay no heed! Ignore her! Let others tremble who have cause!"

Tenderly he drooped the black-lashed, heavy lids which his followers adored, and, looking on his Juliet's face, he thought her mouth was like a fresh red rose, all dewy sweet and pure; and suddenly, for them, the applause was pierced by a short laugh—sneering, cold, and wounding. It might have been the sharp, cold thrust of an icicle, so violently Thrall started at the sound, and as the act moved on and Sybil faced again the occupant of the box, a slow, contemptuous smile grew about the woman's lips—a smile so injuriously significant that a flood of color rushed over Sybil's face and breast and arms, and her confusion and bewilderment were so great that those who shared the scene had once or twice to prompt her. Indeed, she might have failed utterly had she not recalled the tenderly whispered words, "Pay no heed; ignore her." Stewart's word was law. He said "ignore" this cruel, sneering creature, and she would obey and play her best—but, oh, she would be glad when the play was over!

Sybil next became conscious of a certain amount of excitement—suppressed, yet evident, behind the scenes—whisperings and nudges and smiles that were gone the moment Thrall appeared; and, somehow, she felt that she was involved in what was going on; it was all vague, unreal, like [Pg 292] a dream.

Stivers, thin of figure, in black gown and white apron—her flat, hard chest covered with a sort of breastplate of neatly quilted-in needles of all numbers and pins of all sizes—had sidled into an entrance that commanded a view of the stranger's box, a most unusual thing for her to do, who rarely left the dressing-room save to carry Juliet's train as far as the stage and at once return. But there she was and Jim Roberts, dressed and ready for the Apothecary, stood shaking like a leaf beside her, and as she approached she heard him say: "I knew it! I knew she had some devil's trick in mind! That's Manice's work over there, bringing her back from London! Oh——"

He stopped at sight of Sybil, and moved away a bit. She was just opening her lips to send Stivers for Mr. Thrall when a door slammed opposite, and she glanced across.

It has been said that Thrall was a man who never forgot appearances, never disregarded the customary, regular social conventions, and now he was doggedly doing "the proper thing" in full view of the admiring public and the observant critic. For in his stage costume he, seemingly taking care to keep well back, was greeting with empressement the chill, flaxen blond woman there, leaning toward her to catch her valued remarks, and doing the agreeably surprised with such inimitable grace that Sybil's pained amazement at the sight wrung from her the question: "Who is that woman in the box?" [Pg 293]

Stivers slid quietly away. Miss Manice, who had been "in front," came back just then, her mean little face all aglow with satisfaction, and she it was who answered: "That, my dear? Why, that's the Missus."

Sybil looked almost stupidly at her. Manice laughed. "Don't you hunderstand low-class Henglish?" she jeered, "or have you really never heard of her before?"

"Who is the Missus?" slowly asked the girl.

And Manice answered, sharply: "She is Mrs. Stewart Thrall!"

It was Jim Roberts who caught Sybil as she fell, and, as he carried her past Manice, he

whispered: "I'd like to kill you, you viper!"

"Y-e-s?" she sneered, "I suppose your boss is too big game for you to tackle; but he's the party you ought to kill, if you will insist on being so melodramatic."

And over in the box Mrs. Thrall, who had seen the fall, remarked, coolly: "There seems to be a commotion over there. Oh, I wouldn't leave the box suddenly if I were you; it might not look well, and you are always so careful of appearances." But Thrall was rushing back to the stage like a madman. [Pg 294]

CHAPTER XXIV

"I WILL NOT DIVORCE YOU"

In the "Stage Notes," or "Stage Whispers," or "Gossip of the Stage," of the Sunday papers (next morning), there had been mention made of "A pleasant little surprise at the Globe Theatre, where a lady had so successfully secluded herself in the shadows of her box that the play was half over before Mr. Thrall had discovered in her his wife, whom he supposed to be still in London. Strict disciplinarian as he is, the manager was so far lost in the husband that he hurried, all costumed as he was, to the box to greet and warmly welcome her. The audience would gladly have taken a hand in the greeting, had they been quite sure the lady was Mrs. Thrall, but as she had arrived too late to make a proper evening toilette, yet could not deny herself the pleasure of seeing at once her husband's latest great production, she almost wrapped herself in the box curtain, thus facing the stage while hiding herself from the house. When discovered, the returned wanderer laughingly told Mr. Thrall she hoped that, in common justice, he would place his own name at the head of that week's 'docked list,' as a heavy forfeit is demanded of anyone who appears in front of the house after taking any part, no matter how brief, in the performance, and he was doubly [Pg 295] guilty, in that he was in full costume. He gravely argued there would be no one to profit by the forfeit, since he was himself manager as well as offending actor. But she quickly extended an open hand, and cheerfully offered to receive the forfeit, and even to invest it wisely and cautiously, and Mr. Thrall retired from both argument and box."

Also, there had been a brief mention of "The swooning of Miss Sybil Lawton, between acts. The cause given was fatigue, the long run of the play, and the double performance of Saturday, making a heavy draught upon the strength of so young a girl."

One paper added that "Miss Lawton herself made light of the matter, saying, 'Fainting was a mere family trait with the Lawtons, an inheritance the same as a very long thumb or a peculiar ear,' but though she laughed, she looked very white, and leaned heavily upon the arm of her woman companion."

When the play ended that night the call-boy had been sent to tell Mr. Roberts that "he was wanted at Mr. Thrall's dressing-room, as quickly as possible," and presently, shabby and shambling, with every nerve aquiver, and in a most savage temper, he obeyed. Outside the door he stood respectfully enough, his hat in hand. Inside his manner became a half-cowed insolence. He put his hat on, and, nervously buttoning and unbuttoning his coat, said: "Well; you whistled your cur—here I am! Whom am I to be sic'd at this time?"

The most of Romeo's delicate finery hung about on hooks; the splendor of his waving, golden-brown locks graced a wooden block standing on the dressing-shelf; his cloak and cap and sword [Pg 296] were piled in a pell-mell heap; his dainty shoes were most anywhere; while everywhere were cigarettes—damp, spoiled, but unlighted, because of his own strict rule against smoking in the dressing-rooms, and the man himself, bending over the marble basin in that frenzy of soapy lather, without which the male countenance may not be considered cleansed, answered from its midst: "I'm not sic'ing you on anyone!"

"That's queer! There was a time when I was often sent for, to discuss an important 'set,' or listen to some troublesome or involved scene, or was sent to libraries to root out notes for your information, but Lord! Lord! that was long ago! The stage-manager is your counsellor now, but I can still do all those hateful services that pass under the general term of 'dirty-work.' Whenever a request is to be refused; whenever a discharge is to be made; whenever a furious woman is to be faced—that a scene may be prevented at the theatre—I am summoned, and the damned funny part of it is, I come and accept my orders and carry them out; but even you can hardly expect me to enjoy the work of getting you out of every scrape."

"You were not called upon in the Manice matter," Thrall somewhat sullenly remarked from the folds of a towel.

"N—o!" assented Roberts, regretfully. "I should have enjoyed handing in her dismissal. But go ahead with your orders! The job must be pretty tough, judging from the way you hang fire in naming it." [Pg 297]

Thrall turned, and his face startled Roberts. It was so pale, so drawn, so anxious, he seemed to have washed away all its youth and pride and brightness, along with the grease paint and the rouge, in the basin of soapy water. He turned his troubled eyes in silent reproach upon the

speaker, who asked, in a more respectful tone: "Well, what is it?"

"It is," said Thrall, turning to the shelf and taking up a brush, which he began to use hurriedly upon his hair, "it's the child, Jim—the Princess! She—well, she's had a blow. The moment I'm out of here I'll run against some of the boys from the papers, then I'll have to see the Missus home—and stay there. And, Jim, those two women are all alone in that house, and should the child go to pieces, and need a doctor's care——"

Jim muttered an oath. "As bad as that?" he asked, fiercely. "Didn't she know?"

"Oh, I don't know—I don't know anything to-night," groaned Thrall, "except her need of protection! Jim, can't you go there? Jane Stivers will let you in, quietly; she'll give you a couch in the parlor to rest until dawn, and you can carry that old medicine case with you, too, so that any early rising neighbor may mistake you for a doctor leaving the house. Then, should any need arise, you would be on hand to serve her, and I—[he dropped the brush and held his head hard between his hands] I should be a trifle farther away from the insane asylum! Will you do it? Say, speak quick! I've got to hurry down to the Missus! Jim, what the devil brought her back from [Pg 298] London so suddenly, though she will tell me presently herself, I suppose?"

And Jim answered: "Manice brought her back—well, you see if I'm not right! She's been sending anonymous letters. Y-e-s, I'll follow Stivers, and stand by till morning. Hand down that medicine-case. But I'm doing it for her sake, not yours, mind you!"

And then Stewart Thrall, with a pang at his heart, had seen Sybil leave the theatre on Stivers's arm, while he, with seeming gayety, was presenting Mrs. Thrall to a little group of friends, among whom were a couple of ubiquitous newspaper men—hence the "Stage Notes" next day.

Early Sunday morning Stewart had slipped from his room and the house, and hurrying off in search of Jim Roberts had found him at his boarding-house, already well on the way to complete inebriation, early as it was; and so unruly, headstrong, and unmanageable that it was difficult indeed to learn anything about the passing of the night at Stivers's house; and what he did wring from him only added to his own pain.

"For two hours by that cussed watch," said Jim, flinging the scratched and dented timepiece across the room, "minute by minute, I watched and listened to her unceasing walk—walk—walk over my head. She had shut Stivers out! She had acted a five-act tragedy twice that day, she had had neither dinner nor supper, and there she was walking miles up there alone—in the night! And then we heard speaking, and Jane and I listened on the stairs, and she was saying, over and over —oh, how I wish you had died last summer, Thrall, you with your infernal soft eyes and girl lashes [Pg 299] and stony, hard heart! Friendship?—nothing! How can there be friendship without mutual respect and esteem and good will? You've a lot of esteem for me, haven't you? Well, I've less for you! Why should I tell you what she said or did? Oh, the *past*! You let that past alone, do you hear? Poor child, saying over and over, 'Too early seen unknown and known too late! known too late! *known too late!*' Oh, you're going, are you? Well, I was starting for a doctor when that cat Stivers played her last card. She said: 'Miss Sybil, dear, you *must* take a little nourishment, or I shall send this telegram I've written to your mamma, Mrs. Lawton, and she will be here by ten in the morning. I can't have you fainting from exhaustion, and me getting the blame;' and at that the door opened quickly, and the cup of beef-tea was accepted. Stivers even got the chance to brush her hair a bit, but not one word did she speak of any trouble or worry, other than that she 'was suffering from an attack of the nerves.' Poor, plucky little soul! She'd never give anyone away! Well, go! I'm devilish glad to see your back, for your face puts murder in my heart!"

And as Thrall left Jim, who was dragging a full flask from his pocket, he muttered to himself: "God! I begin to understand what makes drunkards of some men! Oh, my beloved! my beloved! If I could only go to you—claim you before all the world—do you public reverence! Perhaps—I wonder if Lettice would accept her freedom, we are such utter strangers to each other—perhaps ——" [Pg 300]

He hastened back home, and was surprised to find that Mrs. Thrall had already breakfasted in her own room. He would have been more surprised had he known that her quick ears had heard and her pale eyes had watched his early departure, and that the suspicion it had aroused in her mind would add much to the difficulties of the interview he sought. For what he had to face, he faced without hesitation or delay.

Stewart Thrall's knowledge of feminine character was considerable, yet it was neither deep nor thorough—it was superficial. He understood the tastes, the fancies, the caprices of women; he was a past-master in delicate flattery; he was quick to recognize the almost unconscious pose of a pretty woman. Was she literary, he was earnest and intellectual and quoted her favorite poet; was she artistic, he straightway saw in her the potential painter, only handicapped by circumstance; while, if she were simply coquettish, he was indeed upon solid ground. Women loved to be appreciated; he not only accepted them at their own valuation, but added something to the appraisement. What wonder, then, that he thought of them as conceited, vain, full of pride, without merit? But even what knowledge he had was to-day useless and unavailing, for there was probably no woman in the world so hopelessly incomprehensible to him as this chill, ashen-blonde creature, whom he had called his wife these twelve years past, though she remained abroad so long at a time for her health (which was perfect) that other people almost forgot he was a Benedick. Save in the theatre one never heard her mentioned. Long ago, a low-class [Pg 301] English servant had habitually referred to her as the "Missus," and with gleeful unanimity the

actors adopted the title, and thus Sybil remained all ignorant that behind the screening nickname of the "Missus" stood a secure and dominant Mrs. Stewart Thrall.

The pair, who had been talking long, were sitting facing each other. The table between them had a dish of half-dead ferns in a handsome receptacle. Though meant for ornament, they were sadder even than the paper-dry, stick-dead contents of the window jardinière, for they at least no longer struggled, no longer suffered for loving care. Stewart had remarked apropos of their condition: "You see they have felt your absence, Lettice?"

And she had given the little downward pull to the corners of her mouth that always made him wince, and answered: "But *you* were never looking better or younger in your life than"—(she glanced at his thin, pale, anxious face, and significantly finished)—"than you were yesterday."

There was a litter, too, of Sunday papers, a Tauchnitz novel, and writing materials keeping the dead ferns company, and now, in the pause that was lengthening out between them, he carefully piled up the pencils and penholders, building and unbuilding pens, some square, some three-cornered, while all the time the ash-blonde woman opposite sat steady, self-contained; and, though her satirical lightness of manner was changing fast into a sullen anger that settled heavily about her lips and clouded her brow, her hands yet rested quietly in her lap, while her cold eyes watched the man she wondered at not a little—for he was changed. Heretofore, innuendoes had [Pg 302] ever had power to drive him to hot rage, to-day his tolerance might have passed for indifference, but for the quick trembling of those ever-building fingers.

She told him of the anonymous letters that had convinced her that he was making a fool of himself, publicly enough, to endanger her dignity as a wife, and so——

"And so," he interrupted, "you broke faith with me on the strength of an anonymous lie? You have returned, not to find the scandal in existence, but to learn that your presence here makes life much harder for us both. You must feel proud to know that a creature like Manice has used you so easily!"

"Almost as proud as you must be to recall certain love passages between you," retorted Lettice.

"Pardon me, one cannot 'recall' what has never existed. I have even yet a little respect for the word and the sentiment of love, and would never think of casting such pearls into the Manice trough!"

"You are so remarkably frank about this malicious young person, perhaps you will be equally so about this rare conservatory blossom—this quite wonderful Juliet, this new 'chère amie'? Oh, you can't deny—save to the blind—your infatuation for her! Admitting that you have had so far an eye to appearances, that no open scandal is yet afoot, it is still plain to all that you love her! Silence? That's odd—from you! Does she understand how she is honored? Have you acquainted her with the number she should wear upon her breast? Don't break that holder! What creatures men are! [Pg 303] Deception, ingratitude, and treachery were your very wedding-gifts to me. Disloyalty has long become a habit with you."

"Lettice, did it ever occur to you that a wife's unjust suspicions may help a man on to disloyalty? You no sooner took my name than you became a personified suspicion. You claimed dominion over my very thoughts. My every movement seemed to arouse your mistrust. You put spies upon me, when I had not even a thought of disloyalty. I discovered it, and, though I am ashamed now of the boyish folly, it's none the less true that I first broke my solemn vow to you out of revenge for your unjust suspicion. Then you helped me with your money and with your astonishing ability to twist and turn everything to our advantage and profit; and let me say that your audacious plans were not always quite scrupulous, Lettice! But when I found that that troubled you not a bit, I somehow felt that my disloyalty was not worth troubling about either. I was truly grateful for your help, but you wanted me on my knees, and you rubbed the service in so hard that it became unendurable, and I was in torment until I paid you the money back, with interest. But still you feel that I owe you a debt of gratitude, because, finding me an artist, full of dreams and willing to wait for their fulfilment, you have made of me a showman instead—a successful one at that. And now we have become such strangers that we place the ocean between us, for the comfort of its vast breadth dividing us. Lettice, we can't be less to each other than we are, and [Pg 304] yet you reproach me with my infidelities. I can't understand why. I can't even understand why you married me. If you had ever loved me"—(he was busy with the pencils, he never saw the slowly rising blood creeping up even to the roots of her hair)—"but you never did, even at the first. I suppose you could not resist that craving you had to show what you could do with me, how you could push me. Lettice, don't you want to accept half of my earnings, and—and take your freedom—your legal freedom, I mean—without any blame being attached to you? Lettice, cast back my name, you can't care for it longer. See, I humble myself to entreat your favor in this matter! Accept your freedom—become once more Lettice Rowland!"

And, as the urgent voice ceased, Lettice asked, coldly: "Why?" and then had followed the silence.

And the man with the restless fingers saw all the time the dark, stricken face of the girl he loved, and seemed to hear the rapid, uneven footfalls of the young creature pursued by bitter memories through the heavy hours of the night, and the perspiration stood upon his forehead.

The pale eyes opposite that watched saw he suffered, and bitterness grew evenly with the wonder that filled her heart. She was a tenacious woman, one who would even hold fast a thing which she no longer valued, simply because it belonged to her. She was clever and shrewd, and

she was making some astonishingly correct deductions from Thrall's looks and manner as well as his words. Hitherto his amours had been lightly formed and lightly broken, and she had been [Pg 305] conscious at times of a sort of contemptuous pity for the women whose reign she knew would be so brief—but this was different. She had known last night—she told herself, she had seen, she had heard the new tenderness in his glance and tone. She saw in Sybil a new type of rival, a creature of intelligence as well as of beauty; and then and there had lighted even the dull anger that was burning in her now. She looked at his goodly length of limb, at his well-shaped, closely cropped head, at the black sweep of lashes she knew he hated. A sudden quiver came about her pale lips as she recalled how, in their early married days, she had often called his attention to something on the floor just for the pleasure of seeing their silky length sweep downward. He had never known, or he would probably have repeated the deed of his boyhood, when in a rage he had cut them off close to the lids and had been shut up under the doctor's care in consequence. And now he wanted her to give him up.

"Why?" She had not known that she had spoken the word until his start told her. Then he said, slowly:

"You would be happier, I think, Lettice" (he smiled faintly). "You would not be distressed, then, by my bad conduct, you know."

"Your consideration for my feelings is as touching as it is novel, but it is not a convincing reason for the putting away of a wife."

"A wife?" repeated Thrall, as he raised his eyes and looked steadily, meaningly, at her. "I think the precise and unemotional dictionary itself will describe wife as a 'woman united to a man by [Pg 306] marriage.' Are we united, Lettice? It is nearly three years since our tenderly emotional public parting at the steamer, but our real parting dates much farther back."

She interrupted, to say, sharply: "Well, no one knows of that, and I'm sure my presence in London was of great service to you. At least two important plays would have escaped you, but for me and my clever planning."

"Yes," he answered, a little weariedly. "But I was not speaking of our relations as manager and agent—they are quite satisfactory; but I was about to state that while I am not an unmarried man —I am wifeless."

"Ah!" she ejaculated; "that never troubled you before!"

He paid no heed, but went on, steadily: "The law cannot put us one inch farther asunder than we are now, but it can free us from this hypocrisy and pretence, and restore us our dignity and independence and freedom."

"My friend," came in the well-modulated voice that was the sole charm of the woman opposite, "do you then take me for a fool? It required two to make our bargain, it will require two to break it. I am Mrs. Stewart Thrall as surely to-day as I have ever been. You have broken your vows; but I have kept mine, at least [in answer to an accusing look] I have not broken them—I have been loyal."

"Why?" dryly put in Thrall.

A little of color came into her face as she answered: "From self-respect, sir! I have pushed your [Pg 307] interests, I have seen you rise, and I mean to stand by your side and share your honors! You are mine! You can't divorce me, and I won't divorce you, without more reason than this new whim of yours for a swarthy, black-browed girl with a red mouth that you will tire of in six months' time, and who, in spite of her good breeding, which is evident enough, may give you sufficient trouble for you to be glad to have this marriage service to hide behind!"

"*Lettice!*" cried Thrall, springing to his feet, "so help me God, you tempt me to strangle you! Oh, but see here! You are hard as nails in seeming, but how can I tell what is in your heart? Perhaps it is big and generous and warm enough to pity the innocent victim of your husband's lust; yes, and there you have a reason strong enough for a divorce."

Perhaps she might, in sheer swift contempt, have cast him his freedom had he not blundered, as men will in their dealings with women; and, in a sudden passionate burst of love and pity and remorse for the girl not yet twenty years old, whose life and honor were resting in their hands, "prayed her to be generous and great in magnanimity; to leave him free to right the horrible wrong he had done, and in return to accept his lifelong service, his reverent friendship!" His eyes were misty, his voice was trembling, his very soul was at his lips.

She rose, and, looking coldly into his pleading face, she said: "I am Mrs. Stewart Thrall. I will not be cast aside!" [Pg 308]

Patiently he answered: "I ask you to put *me* away!"

Steadily she resumed: "I will not act against the law. Collusion is illegal!"

He picked up a book, and bent it back and forth unconsciously.

"You are my husband!"

"That is false!" he said, sharply.

"In the eyes of the law," she went on, unheedingly, "if I choose to condone your offences, that is sufficient. Your light o' love is naught to me. *I* have been a faithful wife!" Thrall laughed aloud.

"Hereafter I shall live here at your side. I will not divorce you, and so give you to another. I shall remain Mrs. Stewart Thrall, while I live and while I die. I am a good woman, and therefore you cannot be divorced by any law on earth!"

Glancing down at the book, Thrall saw it was Milton's "Paradise Lost," and, flinging it on the table, he cried: "I wonder why Milton didn't make a virtuous woman the keeper of the gate of hell!"

As he left the room he added: "Lettice, against your hard, repellent virtue a generous sinner shines like an angel!" And he went forth to the bitterest hour of his life—his next meeting with Sybil Lawton. [Pg 309]

CHAPTER XXV

"TO LOVE IS TO FORGIVE"

The troubles of the young are tragic in their intensity, and during that night of despair Sybil had suffered keenly, cruelly, hopelessly. It seemed to her that she had fallen into an abyss from which rescue was impossible. For the first time she realized that in the recklessly generous giving of her love there had been destroyed something more precious even than the "alabaster box" so recklessly shattered, centuries ago, by a loving woman in the eager doing of a more sacred homage.

The bitterness of her fall revealed to her how great her pride had been, and at first a furious resentment filled her heart against the man who in love's name had so humbled her. Looking back through the golden light of that time of perfect joy, she tried to see what path had led her to the precipice, to understand why she had not resisted and held back. Then slowly, very slowly, it dawned on her that *opportunity* had been the lure that gently led her into a laxity that almost imperceptibly through remissness became latitude. Her daily carefully guarded companionship with Stewart Thrall at Mrs. Van Camp's home had placed her upon a friendly footing of perfect confidence, and he was so great he must, she thought, be good; and so she had scarcely noticed [Pg 310] when at Stivers's house he first read her her Tennyson, sitting at her feet, leaning against her knee, and had paid no heed to the increasing frequency of those afternoon demands for Stivers's presence at the theatre wardrobe-room; and when she played for him upon the little upright piano, standing across the corner of the room, it had not startled her, when he was turning her music, to feel him drop a kiss into her wavy, up-gathered hair. Experience and opportunity as against inexperience and foolish trust!

Again the words of Juliet came to her lips: "Known too late! known too late!" And Juliet thought herself unhappy—unhappy, when she was not shamed, when she was loved!

"Oh!" she wrung her hands hard, "he seemed—he truly seemed to love me! His beautiful eyes glowed so! His lips had a smile that seemed for me alone! But then, dear God! I forget now, as I forgot then, he is an actor!" She laughed contemptuously. "A great actor! and I have helped to pass away those weary hours, when he was bereft of the gayety of the joyous Mrs. Thrall!"

For women know one another well, and, as Sybil had passed on Stivers's arm that night, Mrs. Thrall had sent a merry laugh forth, apropos of nothing spoken, but simply to pierce the lonely girl's heart with jealous pain—and she had succeeded perfectly.

The long, sleepless night of agony and shame had left its mark on the girl, young and strong as she was. Her room, made bower-like with ferns and palms and many scarlet poinsettias (Thrall [Pg 311] taboo'd all perfumed, growing plants there) seemed to accentuate the languor and the weariness of its girlish occupant. Wrapped in a Japanese kimona, white and gold outside and peachy pink within, with wavy, densely dark hair tucked up carelessly with a big shell comb, the bluish shadows beneath her heavy eyes, the level brows drawn close, and the sullen, red mouth all unsmiling, she looked a very tragic young figure and pitiful withal, to the haggard gaze of Stewart Thrall, the man who loved her and had wronged her.

He stood before her, very erect, very pale. His dark-blue eyes, guiltless of amorous droop, wide and bright, had in them a strained intensity of regard that was painful. Raw soldiers, under waiting orders, though yet in sight of action, wear just that expression of strained vision—of desperate self-control. At first sight of him Sybil had felt her tired heart give a glad upward spring in her breast, and her impulse was to fly into his arms for shelter, and there to weep, and weep, and weep—while he, in fond, foolish fashion, kissed and beat her slim hand softly against his cheek—just as might the mother of a little wailing child. But suddenly she seemed to see beside him the pale, ashen-blonde woman, who, from the shadowy box, had so tormented her, and who later stood beneath the blazing lights, and, holding fast the arm of this man—her husband—had sent forth that mocking, triumphant laugh, that, like a hate-sped arrow, had fairly reached its victim's heart, where it would rankle for many a day to come! And she checked the [Pg 312] impulse, and asked, instead, "What brings you here?"

"Sybil! Sybil!" the man pleaded.

She looked at him with gloomy eyes, and said, slowly: "My father is an old man, esteemed weak even by his family; yet, being one of those old-fashioned absurdities—a gentleman—he values the honor of his daughters so highly that if he knew the truth he would surely kill you, Mr. Thrall!"

"And he would be within his rights," gravely assented Stewart.

"But," continued the girl, in coldly contemptuous tones, "after all, we are not properly located, geographically, for such a deed. I lack, too, the instinctive love of carnage that makes the shedding of an enemy's blood necessary to the girl of the tropics, when the wrecking of her honor has been the amusement of some married man!"

Thrall stood as if he had received the cut of a whip, but said nothing—not one word.

"Why are you here?" she broke out then more hotly. "Your coming is an insult to me! Perhaps, pitying my loneliness and now having made me a fit companion for the Manice, you may be about to remove the embargo formerly placed upon my association with her!"

He turned pained eyes upon her and said, faintly: "Child, you strike hard and deep, but don't turn the knife!"

"Oh!" she cried, "so highly placed, so powerful, so flattered and so sought, why could you not pass *me* by? Why need you stoop to break so poor and lowly a thing? You were cowardly! you were cruel! No wonder you are silent—had you no truth, no honor, no love?" [Pg 313]

He answered, still very low: "Of truth and honor, very little, but love?" he looked at her with devouring eyes, "dear God, *love*?"

And she repeated bitterly, jeeringly: "Love? You, a married man?"

He smiled a little and answered, gently: "Love comes as it wills, and—and—" There he stopped, for he saw by the horror in her eyes that for the first time she saw in their relations simply sin, bereft of all sophistry, and he was dumb—he, the clever, the brilliant, usually so full of subtlety and finesse, who in a like situation in the past would have laughingly denounced the folly of blushing for an undiscovered sin, or have gayly taught his fair companion in guilt that eleventh commandment, so dear to the worldly man and the light woman: "Be ye not found out, for of such is the kingdom of the Successful." He stood with all the artifices stricken from him, incapable of specious argument, of trick or wile of any kind. Erstwhile, where money had had power to tempt, he had seen that money had power to comfort, too—but not here! not here! Where grief and passionate reproach looked from eyes that yesterday had shone all radiant with love—her glory then—her shame to-day! And all there was of manhood in him was roused to vehement longing to honor publicly the creature whom he had secretly dishonored. [Pg 314]

"Oh!" she moaned, helplessly, "what shall I do with my life! I am ashamed to look back—I am afraid to look forward! They said there was no sex in art! And when you showed such patience with me and my ignorance, I almost worshipped you, and hoped art might make me as generous in time! But it was your approval I toiled for! It was your acting that I strove to emulate! Perhaps you thought I was not grateful; but, oh, I was! I was! And I used to think if I ever wore the dramatic crown I yearned for, I'd proudly tell to all the world whose hand had placed it in my reach! Perhaps if you had known how humbly grateful I was, you would not have made me pay this awful price!"

The man's jaws clenched so tightly that their outlines showed white on his cheeks.

"As a conquest, Mr. Thrall, I am scarcely worthy of your skill, and yet my being a 'society débutante' may add a slight fillip of novelty to the old, old story of ruined girlhood—such trifles help, no doubt, to keep up an actor's popularity!"

"You are very cruel!" he groaned.

"*I?*" she cried, accusingly, "*I* am cruel?"

"Yes; it is cruel to take pleasure in another's pain, but—" He closed his eyes an instant, and then went on very patiently. "I may not ask you for mercy. Being guilty, it is right I *should* suffer!"

"Suffer?" she repeated, unbelievingly. "You? Why should you suffer, pray? You have hung a millstone about *my* neck for life! But you go lightly enough along the conqueror's path! *You* suffer —from what? You have done nothing to unfit you for your world! You will be feasted and banqueted as usual; you are quite secure with your fashionable clientèle of women, who will applaud you rapturously, while looking upon me as forever defiled!" Then, rather wildly, she added: "You said the crown you promised me was pasteboard, but you did not tell me it was wreathed inside with thorns! Oh, why have you betrayed my adoring faith in you! What have I ever done to harm you? Why—why in God's great name—why have you so deceived me?" [Pg 315]

Slowly he answered: "I thought you——"

"Do not dare!" gasped Sybil, "do not dare add a last infamous insult to cruel injury by telling me you thought I knew you were married!"

"At first," he persisted, "I supposed you knew; then when I found you did not, I—I—was in the grasp of a merciless passion. Dear, I *could* not speak! I *could not*, I tell you! Sybil! beloved! I

would step between you and death without the flicker of an eyelash! I would give my life's blood for you as freely as a cup of water! Yet, I—who would gladly defend you from a world, was not strong enough to defend you from myself—from the love that possessed me utterly—at whose fire I relit ambition—romance—the desire for high achievement! You believe me guilty of a mere base passion; you are wrong! Doubtless there are men in the world who, loving even as I loved you, could have held their feelings well in leash, sealed their lips for honor's sake, but that power [Pg 316] would come from long training and much practice in self-denial—not from one sporadic effort of self-control! And I, oh, child, flattered by the world—vain, egotistical, and spoiled—when had I acquired strength through patient endurance or through temptations resisted? I was incapable of self-abnegation; I, who had denied myself nothing all my life long, could not begin by denying my desperate love the possession that it longed for! For men are like that, dear, in spite of your contemptuous unbelief. Be they good or be they bad, be they ever so reverently true, their senses will demand possession of the beloved. And I was so desolate—so lonely! There was not even friendship within the whited sepulchre of my domestic life."

The girl shrank. "Don't!" she cried, "don't add to cruelty and cowardice—treachery to her! She is very cruel, but then a good wife who suspects a wrong to her love has a right to be cruel!"

"Oh, you innocent, just soul!" the man cried. "Yes, she is cruel in very deed, since being a wife in name alone these years past she yet clings tenaciously to that empty title. She has not enough womanly pride to free the man who earnestly pleads to be released, whose chill indifference protects her from temptation. She is technically a loyal wife, but practically a foe—a sort of satiric keeper of the records of my life. 'A wrong to her love,' you said. You generous child, she does not know what love means, but she does know her legal rights; and to my agony will maintain them to the last, since the shibboleth of her life is: 'What will the world say?' Yes, she is [Pg 317] very cruel!"

Sybil shivered as she recalled the contemptuous slow smile, the unrelenting, inquisitorial, pale eyes, but answered: "I suppose I should be cruel, too, if I were a wronged wife." She stopped; the blood rushed in a scarlet tide over all her shamed, pained face. "A wife?"—she gave a gasp and put her hand to her throat as if to remove some stricture there. "I may never be a wife! Marriage is honorable! Dorothy may wed, but I—" And then an agonized cry rang through the house: "Dorothy! oh, Dorothy! Little sister! I have lost you! I shall not dare to look into your honest eyes, lest you should see the sin in mine! I may not kiss your lips or touch your cheek, nor ever again pillow your dear head upon my arm the long night through because of the pollution on my life that makes me base, unworthy, and unfit associate for innocence like yours!"

"Be silent!" savagely interrupted Thrall, with death-white face.

"I have fallen to a level with the creatures you pity in the street, little sister! I am defiled forever!" And she fell prone upon the couch in an agony of tears.

Thrall sprang at her like a tiger; he dragged her to a sitting position among the tumbled cushions, and, grasping her shoulders, he rocked her back and forth in savage rage, crying: "How dare you? how dare you, I say? You have been pleased to call me coward many times to-day, but you have the bitter right to say what you will to me, and I must bear it patiently because I merit [Pg 318] more even than you say; but I am not coward enough to stand by and hear you blaspheme against yourself! I, by every wile at my command, by the compelling charm and strength of a great love, and by your ignorance of human nature, have led you into a breach of the law! Well, the fault is mine—God knows that! You vile? you defiled? how dare you? You are as pure in heart as any earthly creature can be! Your sense of honor, your respect for duty, your high ideals have made deception and falsehood hateful to me! Your quick sympathy for those who suffer has made me more considerate of the feelings of those about me! What have you done—what have you to blush for? You have been guilty of a generosity that brings me to my knees in adoration! All glorious as the morning, without suspicion, without fear, having given your great heart, with royal prodigality you gave yourself! You obeyed the instinct nature placed in you, in loving so! How dare you, then, compare yourself to those unfortunates who sell their forced and painted smiles? How dare you—you, pure-hearted, proud, gifted, clean-minded? Have I been rough to you? Forgive me, sweet, but you nearly drove me mad, and—and I suffer, Sybil!"

He sank at her feet, and laid his brow against her knees.

She trembled, but did not speak.

"Beloved," he went on, "I only live through you! My soul is yours! I worship—I adore you! Let me [Pg 319] serve you! I dare not say forgive, but try to forget this private pain in public triumph. You have great gifts; don't neglect them. You are a fashion now—if I live you shall have fame. You shall not be hippodromed, as I was, into the success that stifles faith in the purity of art, the prosperity that swallows up energy and sincerity."

She sat as in a trance, her heart thrilling to the music of a voice that even the public found irresistible. Half her torture had been in the belief that she had become contemptible in his eyes —that she had been a mere "pour passer le temps"; therefore, this homage had something of comfort in its respectful wording as he went on: "I have experience, knowledge, skill; let me use them for your advancement. You shall be left free to study, to realize your beautiful ideals, unhampered by commercial questions of any kind. I will do my best, my very best, to warn you away from pitfalls of mannerisms; to polish and refine without producing artificiality. The service of my whole life shall be yours—the sole object of my life, the secure placing of the dramatic

crown upon your head; and in return I ask [he held out empty, trembling hands] such scraps of affection as may fall from your table of family love—such crumbs of your time as you can spare to me!"

And that humble pleading came from Stewart Thrall, to whom love had been before such a tumultuous, triumphant distraction and amusement!

The girl flushed and paled, but kept her sombre eyes averted from the face, where rage had changed to tender pity and passionate pleading. [Pg 320]

"Sybil?" he almost whispered.

Still she was silent. It was very hard what she had in mind to say. This winning, gracious man had been the hero of all her girlish dreams, as well as the honored "master," who was arbiter of her fate, and only now she realized how he had absorbed her life—how hard it was to give him up, all in a moment. Poor child! this second peril was almost greater than the first; but, worn and weary, she was incapable of reasoning, of seeking out motives then.

"Sybil?" came again the dear, tempting voice, "if I begged for bread, you would not treat me so! Beloved, answer me!" Kneeling there he reached out his arms and clasped her waist. "Answer me, at least!"

She sprang to her feet, and as she put her hands behind her, striving to break his strong clasp, she answered confusedly, brokenly: "I—I—can't—I must go—go quite away! You must know that! I—I—can't play—ever—any more!"

Very compassionately he reminded her: "You must have learned before this, Princess, the inexorable claim of the stage. Nothing but death releases an actor from duty."

"Well," she answered, bitterly, "that Sybil Lawton *is* dead!"

His face contracted painfully, but he answered steadily: "The world does not know that. It would be fatal to us all to close. I am sorry, but the play must go on, beloved." [Pg 321]

Like lightning she recalled the warm hand pressures, the whispered sweet "asides," the passionate love-scene, and that long embrace in the chamber balcony, and cried out sharply: "With *you*? with *you*? I must act again with *you*?"

His arms fell from her waist; his face was hard and white as marble as he rose to his feet. His voice was icy, but during his next courteous, chill words he kept his eyes downcast that the tears might not bear witness to his pain.

"I forgot," he said, "that you were not experienced enough to sink the man in the artist, and—and you must pardon my dulness, but—I did not fully appreciate the—[he moistened his unwilling, stammering lips] the loathing you feel for me personally. I have proved very slow-witted, but I am not a pachyderm, and my intelligence can be reached, you see, by sharp, stinging pain. Your method is severe, Miss Lawton, but eminently successful. I am not likely to forget the lesson now that I have learned it."

Sybil's dark eyes dilated with pain. Her need of sympathy was so great that those icy tones turned her faint with misery.

"It was hard enough before," she murmured, and a piteous quiver came about her lips.

He had been mortified, humbled, and wounded when she shrank so from acting with him again. He thought it signified bitter hate, unconquerable aversion; and, instead, it had been an expression of terror, a confession of a weakness which she only began to realize when she found how hard if was not to yield at once to his pleading. There was something so pathetic, so unconsciously pleading in those words, "It was hard enough before," that he asked pardon, and went gravely on: "It is my duty to obey your wishes so far as my power goes. I cannot take off the play; you will understand yourself when you have time for thought, but being a gentleman, at least superficially [he corrected himself with a flush rising to his face], I will not publicly force my companionship upon you as Romeo, to your private annoyance [his voice shook a little in spite of himself, and he paused a moment]. I will put things in motion at once—looking to your relief." [Pg 322]

Sybil sank into the corner of the couch, and, folding her arms upon a pillow, buried her face in the loose sleeve of her kimona.

"My throat," he went on, "can be in bad shape, and a drop of atropia now and then will keep me hoarse enough for our purpose—just at first. Young Fitzallen [Sybil's hand clenched suddenly], who is quite up in the lines, will take my place 'at short notice to oblige,' and—and, well, after a while we will find some excuse for continuing him in the part. 'Sufficient unto the day,' I have to scurry a bit about the printing and the finding of the young man. He will have to wear some of my costumes; you won't mind that, I hope—Monday night is so very close. He will come over here about ten or half-past in the morning to rehearse with you, and you must be very exacting about the 'business.' See that nothing is forgotten; the public is quick to miss anything it has become accustomed to. The balcony scene [the girl's figure seemed to writhe among the cushions] is—very—important—and—" He stopped, and then quite suddenly he turned toward the door, saying: "I'll do my best to save you from the degradation you dread. I'll send your new Romeo to you early." [Pg 323]

Like pictures on a scroll, she saw all the tender love-scenes, growing one out from another, ever sweeter, stronger, more intense, and at the balcony of Juliet's chamber, at the farewell embrace—that the applause made long—she thought "another's arms about me, another's eyes searching mine," and so, shuddering, repulsion seized upon her and wrung from her lips the cry: "No! no! don't! Oh, don't! I could not bear it—I should die!"

She was standing, one bent knee among the cushions, leaning forward on one supporting arm. He turned. "Sybil—do you mean—you will have mercy on me—that you will try for art's sake to forget the man in the actor? Oh, beloved, if you could believe! To my arid life you brought freshness and strength and reverence—yes, in spite of my sin against you, oh, wife of my soul! Pity me! my sin is very hard to bear!"

Suddenly she stretched out her arms to him. With wide, almost unbelieving eyes he sank on his knees before her, asking, faintly: "You pity me? But, oh, you cannot forgive?" [Pg 324]

She took his head between her hands and kissed his brow, saying: "To love is to forgive!"

He gave a cry and started to his feet. A deadly paleness came upon her face.

"I am not strong enough," she said, "for martyrdom—alas! I am no child of light! But where I love—be it strength or be it weakness—I love forever!"

His arms closed about her, her weary head sank upon his breast. He stooped and kissed her tenderly, solemnly. She lifted her heavy eyes and added "My fidelity shall be my purification!" [Pg 325]

CHAPTER XXVI

THE OPAL

Three years had passed, and Sybil, now the reigning queen of the New York stage, still lived in the quiet little red brick house among the West Thirtieths, to the great indignation of Mrs. Lawton. Inside there was a frank luxury clearly explained to love-sealed eyes by that one elastic word "salary"; though an observant outsider, noting the age-darkened, carved wood, the rare polar-bear robes, and the exquisite bits of bronze, must have thought her a marvellously lucky buyer, or a remarkably well-paid actress. But there were no such observers at hand; perhaps that was why Sybil's vine-dripping, flower-crowded windows seemed to laugh in the face of the grim, shade-drawn propriety of the entire block.

At the rear of the red brick house was a small cooper or carpenter shop that faced on the other street. It had long been unoccupied, so that when Stivers took a notion to hire it for a store-room and sort of laundry, she got it cheap; and after the neighbors had once or twice seen her going in and out, and hanging a few pieces of linen to dry, there was no further heed paid to the matter. But if one was very intimate with Mrs. Stivers, and received from her a shop key, why, one could both enter and leave the house from the back street without bothering with the front door bell. [Pg 326]

Sybil had "overflowed," as Dorothy said, and had swept away Stivers's too dreadful parlor, and in its stead there was now a library and sitting-room combined—a nook glorious in winter because of an open fire and in summer made dim and cool by many clambering vines, and sweet by boxes of mignonette crowding the small balcony, a room full of the scattered riches of rare books, of carved ivories, of miniatures, of bubbles of Venetian glass, beautiful as jewels and almost as precious, a room for study, for dreams, for love, and sometimes a room for bitter brooding and regret.

Visitors to this house were a rare occurrence, but Sybil had just been speeding the parting guest in the person of her mother, who was "to pick up" John at Forty-second Street, and thus receive protection on the homeward ride to Riverdale; for "positively in these days," she declared, "unless you're perfectly white and doubled together with age, men ogle you as if you were twenty. There was a dreadful little pot-bellied, Hebraic person—that sounds queer, doesn't it, but it's an absolutely correct expression and perfectly descriptive of the man's shape—and I declare to you he kept his eyes on my face until I felt quite agitated, and everyone in the car must have noticed his conduct. Yet John Lawton was so unfeeling as to tell me that if I stopped looking at the man, I wouldn't know that he was staring. Not know it, indeed! Why, I could feel anyone ogling me through the back of my neck! Still, after such an experience, I hope I shall not miss John!" [Pg 327]

Mrs. Lawton had devoted one of her three days to her old friend, Mrs. Van Camp, and to shopping, and two days to Sybil. She had arrived in state, and after a supercilious glance at her, had addressed the owner and mistress of the house as "Stivers"—though Sybil was most punctilious in calling her Mrs. Stivers. She had so traduced the coffee (which was perfect) by asking "if the blackness was not the result of licorice," that, though Jane Penny had maintained a strictly respectful attitude, murder had shown so plainly in her eye that Letitia had not dared to take the second cup she longed for, for fear of poison. And when she was alone with her daughter she remarked: "She's a cat, that Stivers! Clean and neat, like any other cat, and purry! Oh, yes, she can purr about *you*, but she's crafty, cunning, shrewd! You keep your desk locked, my dear! She's too soft-footed for my taste; she's got an eye for a key-hole, too!"

While Jane said to herself: "There's a vain old cockatoo—overbearing, hectoring, using her high and mighty birth as an excuse for wiping her shoes on us as is beneath her. I guess I could add a chapter to her family history that would take the wind out of her sails pretty quick! But my bank book's more important to me than her nasty slurs! 'Stivers,' indeed! It's a wonder it wasn't 'Penny.' The young ladies don't find it beneath them to call me Mrs. Of course in this one it might be policy, but the other one does it, too. It's plain enough to me the daughters get their decent [Pg 328] manners from the father. A nice old man that, a gentleman clear through and always welcome here, even by Mr. Thrall; though for appearance sake he does then have to come hat and stick in hand and make a proper fifteen-minute or half-hour call and go. Poor, pale old gentleman; he's an idolator, if ever there was one, just bowing down to and worshipping those girls of his'n. If he knew the secret of that little locked closet upstairs, if he knew of the dinner-jacket, the lounging robe hanging there, he'd die without a word right as he stood. Poor old gentleman! But, Lord! how our boss does hate that old cockatoo! and how she does ko-tow to him and bridle and smirk! Not but what she looks well enough at the supper-table, for with all her rouge she can carry her clothes well. I think Mr. Thrall dislikes her for one thing, because of the likeness he sees in her to Miss Sybil. I overheard her saying in fun to him: 'I shall be just like mamma when I am as old,' and he said: 'Then for God's sake die in your youth!' and, though she tried hard to look angry, she had to laugh, and he looked ashamed of himself, and asked pardon.

"It does beat all, how long this affair lasts. Talk about worshipping the ground she walks on; I believe he's jealous of the air she breathes. Well, my nest is getting a good warm lining, for they are both generous, and she's easy to serve besides, which is more than I can say of the Missus, who is always prowling about the wardrobe room, ready to make a fuss about a quarter of a yard [Pg 329] of gold or silver lace, or an inch or two of linen-backed velvet, and weighing the camphor-gum to see if it agrees with the amount mentioned in the bill. These splendid Shaksperian productions deprive her of the delight of dickering with authors for new plays, and so she drives Barney wild by her visits to the box-office, and keeps tab on me in the wardrobe, hoping to prevent the escape of a nickel through someone's hands. That woman's heart—if she has one—bears the dollar-mark, I'll wager!"

In the library, Sybil, being alone, dropped down on an old French tabouret, and with chin in hand fell into a reverie. Her other hand drew from her bosom the little diamond heart, whose centre was a registered ruby, flawless and exquisite. It had been Stewart's first gift to her after she had forgiven him, and he had said, very earnestly: "The real value of this jewel is in a word engraved back of that ruby. No, beloved! you cannot open and read without a jeweler's help, but if the locket will not open for you, why, when you have to remove it in your dressing-room, it will not open for another and betray our secret. No, I will not tell the precious word—only wear it always. If the ornament is not suitable to your gown or the occasion, then wear it inside and out of sight —but wear it, beloved, for my sake!"

And now she wondered still what was the word that to him made the value of this rare gift? Was it *love*? Was it *forgiveness*? Was it *beloved*? She sighed a little. The house was rather lonely since [Pg 330] her father and mother had departed. They had come down to see her new great triumph as Beatrice in "Much Ado about Nothing."

Her improvement was wonderful, and Thrall had thrilled with pride when he had heard it commented upon. For Beatrice is a test part that combines comedy the lightest, airiest, and most polished, with both pathos and passion. All actors know that more technical knowledge is required for fine high-comedy acting than for sentiment or even tragedy. And it would have been a bold man who in the first weeks of Juliet had ventured to suggest a future Beatrice in the inexperienced, though immensely tragic, young actress.

Yet here she was, Thrall's ideal Beatrice, well-born, well-bred, beautiful, graceful, but possessed of a young devil of mockery that you saw dancing in her eyes and heard in her bubbling laughter. The stings of her wit seemed healed by the honey of her manner. Full of affectations, airs, and graces toward the courtiers, her "If I were a man!" speech was so full of tender love and sorrow for her injured cousin Hero that its final hot burst of rage and scorn left her with tears wet upon her cheeks.

And consummate artist that he was, Thrall threw such sudden passionate intensity into Benedick's answer, "By this hand I love thee!" that it was no wonder the act brought the people upstanding; and one old playgoer remarked that "it was like watching an exhibition of skilful fencing, where flying sparks made you uncertain whether the bout was friendly or a duel to the [Pg 331] death."

Thrall had kept his promise; he had warned her away from so many pitfalls that some of the critics declared she had triumphed through what she had not done almost as much as through what she had. She had avoided the absolute shrewishness with which Beatrice is often invested; also the vindictive ferocity of the "If I were a man!" that catches the gallery, while it "makes the judicious grieve," and wonder, too, why Benedick should have been called upon for assistance by such a man-eating creature. Neither did she fire her best witticisms point-blank at the audience and pause—to make her "point." And better still, she avoided that strained, unnatural merriment that makes the public pity the evident fatigue of an otherwise satisfactory Beatrice. And this last bore strongest witness to the depth of study she had given to the play—yes, the play; for the actress who studies only her own lines gains but the narrowest and baldest view of the character. Sybil had studied the environment of the brilliant, high-born, wilful "she Mercutio," as Jim Roberts in an inspired moment of intoxication had termed Beatrice, in order to know in what

manner she should address her impertinences to her uncle—whether with a spoiled-child daring, made pardonable by a respectful bearing; in open insolence, or in veiled dislike. So she studied Leonato carefully, and so she did all the characters she came in contact with, with the result that her manner varied according to her varying companions; and the tension of the bow was not strained to the breaking-point at any time. [Pg 332]

Actors and certain critics knew that that swallow-like skimming from laughing badinage to biting satire—that fine restraint, that incredible lightness of touch was backed by certainty, that certainty meant knowledge, and that knowledge meant work. Yet, though Thrall told her again and again that she had in herself the same mocking spirit that informed Beatrice, she would have it that he and he alone had made the performance possible to her. And though he denied it, the assertion was like nectar to the vanity of the artist—like balm to the heart of the man who longed to serve her.

And as it happened the newspapers had, in so many words, hailed her as Queen of the Stage. The term had not been inspired by a suggestion from him. It was extravagant, perhaps, but it was impromptu. And as he read it, the blood swept over his face so redly that the watchful eyes of Mrs. Thrall, sitting behind the tea-urn at the breakfast-table, saw and noted, and when he had left for the theatre, she had studied eagerly that side of the paper, but could not solve the riddle of that deep flush of pleasure. For, though the notice of the play was very flattering to his Benedick, he could not be moved so by the praise of a single newspaper, she thought, even though he triumphed doubly as actor of a part and as managerial producer of nobly correct scenery.

No, she could not solve the riddle; she could never have understood that, because the praise had not been extorted, it was doubly precious, or that one who lauded Sybil—magnified him. [Pg 333]

"Yes," the girl said to herself, as she sat there, "he has crowned me, but—" She sighed, and turned the ruby to catch the light. "I wonder what your message is? One word, he says; perhaps it's *faith*. And yet, no! that would be satirical. What is there to be faithful to—no churchly vows! no!" she bit her lip to silence.

She missed Dorothy very greatly, now, in the lull that always follows the hurry and excitement of preparing for a production, for an irregular love is a great isolation—of necessity.

Dorothy, now two years a wife, had become so precious that she might no more be permitted to pass through that tunnel than to kneel before the car of the Juggernaut. Indeed, Leslie challenged the right of the very winds of heaven to blow too harshly on her face, and if any sweet folly of exaggerated care escaped him John Lawton was on hand to bring it to his attention.

"Ja!" said Lena, who was herself preparing for marriage to her "Mickle," her "mash-man." "Ja, my Miss Lady, I youst hav' ter make of der lies to der Herr Galts und der Herr Boss in der fron' uf der house, und keep der' tentions, vile der Miss Dorrie-Galts com' by der back porch und find out uf she's got any feet on der legs. Youst vat I tell you—der Herr Mens vatch her like der two pig cats, und, ven she get der chance, she laf und say, 'Lena! com' take me out uf der cottin'-battin, quvick! und let's see den uf I break ven I cross der room!" [Pg 334]

When the news had reached Sybil first, she had lain across her bed and sobbed and wept the night away. But next day, when she had repeated it to Thrall, she had withstood the piercing inquiry of his searching eyes, until she heard the sigh of relief that told her he had seen no sign of pain. And she had had hard work to convince him that the splendor of the gift he wished her to send the happy, expectant young mother would not be consistent with her supposed salary, and that Leslie would not be as innocently unobservant as Dorothy.

So now she had not the dear pleasure of her sister's occasional visits. Her face was unutterably sad. Suddenly she stretched her arms above her head, in the same passionate gesture which she had used that night at the old White house, under the starry sky, and now as then she cried out against the bondage that held her! Then it had been poverty—now it was sin! She wore her crown; she lived in luxurious comfort; Stewart's loyalty was complete, beyond question, but —"Love and the world well lost!" she quoted, and laughed aloud—such a woful little laugh. For now, with tear-washed, experienced eyes, she saw the awful error she had made, when in ignorant young passion she had declared "that love was enough"!

A certain austere power of endurance had developed in her during these crowded years. She neither whimpered nor complained, only to her own soul she admitted that lawful, virtuous living was better than love alone; that one could not depart from rectitude and morality without sorrow, tears, and much bitterness of spirit. Just at first the wild sweetness of the forbidden fruit enthralled her—the romance of secret love, the thrill of stolen caresses, of fingers pressed under cover of a stage direction, of kisses swiftly given upon the little "scolding" lock of hair upon her neck, as he deftly and gallantly tied her veil after rehearsal, the precious rare half-days stolen from task-mistress and the world, and spent with her among the palms and poinsettias. Then all the levity fell from him, and he was at his fascinating best—witty, gracious, tender, sympathetic, wholly free from the smell of the footlights that some actors carry about with them all their days. The tiny notes pressed into warm palms, the code of signals—had all been so deliciously mysterious that she had felt herself a real heroine of romance. [Pg 335]

"Poor little fool!" she murmured, contemptuously now, for she recalled that for a time in her infatuation she had felt how ineffably superior was her own romantic, secret, self-sacrificing love to the dull, commonplace, strictly legalized affection of Dorothy and Leslie. But since then—oh, since then! she had had time to wake from her beautiful dream, she had had time to think and to suffer. She knew now that the beautiful temple of love must stand on a foundation of legality, or it would tremble dangerously under every wind that blew! She no longer found anything to deride in the word "propriety," since she had come in bitterness of spirit to realize its meaning: "What ought to be—what should be." And dear Dorothy's life was what it should be, and she had [Pg 336] peace and security and had never known humiliation. "Humiliation!" Sybil twisted her hands and gasped aloud, "God! oh, God!" at the recollections that came to her. For Stewart Thrall's wife had kept her word and stood at his side, and shared his popularity, and applauded him from her box, and called him "dear" before all men on all possible occasions. And suspecting that Sunday evenings might not be spent with "the boys," she had inaugurated small "at homes," to give her dear Stewart a chance to gather his valued friends about him in his own home. And he who had never disregarded public opinion felt compelled to dance attendance upon his wife in name, who held him to his bond for her vanity and convenience. The trite endearments necessity forced from his lips were torture to Sybil when she chanced to hear them; and oh, the agony of a woman, who is secretly loved, when she sees the man who is hers—for whom she has paid with her pride and honor and self-respect—held to the side of another woman, by her legitimate rights! Just as maddening pain will sometimes drive a sufferer to press upon the torturing wound, so Sybil would cry to herself: "She is his true wife, and I am a—caprice!"

It was not true, she knew it was not true, yet a strange necessity for self-torture forced her to repeat the cruel words, as it forced her often to remind Stewart that it was time for him to hasten to some appointment, to drive or to lunch with Mrs. Thrall, who much enjoyed displaying publicly the devotion of her actor-husband. And once, when Sybil had longed to attend a sacred concert [Pg 337] that offered her an only opportunity to hear a certain great singer, she had been forced either to accept Roberts's escort or remain at home, because Mr. Thrall learned at the last moment that Lettice had invited a large party, who were to return afterward and sup with them in the informal way "dear Stewart so enjoys." And, having swiftly decided in favor of a long evening of loneliness at home, taking a bitter pleasure in her own suffering, she had tried to hasten his departure, saying: "A man should never keep his wife waiting."

And in sudden passion, shamed, wounded, angry, he had turned upon her, forbidding her ever to so misapply that word again. "If you must call her Mrs. Thrall, well, be it so—that is enough to bear!"

But Sybil pressed upon the wound, insisting obstinately: "But she is your wife!" and he had doggedly contradicted: "No! no! She is a sort of legalized money-changer in the temple of marriage! She is not a wife! Our wedded life is a monstrous hypocrisy! We are false to ourselves, false to society, false in word, deed, and thought! And yet she is a good woman, whose legal and technical virtue would certainly have given her the valued right to hurl rocks at the woman taken in adultery. Wife? She? The woman whose companionship dragged me down to a lower level than that at which she found me? Oh, I see in your cloudy, scornful face your contempt for the man who blames a woman, and Lettice Rowland Thrall should not be censured for not giving what she has not to give! But oh, her chains are very heavy, and my bondage grows more bitter day by [Pg 338] day! Sometimes I think that I could welcome the death that, taking me from you, beloved, would at least free me from her!"

Frankness was so natural to Sybil's nature that the secrecy and stratagem of intrigue wearied her; the manœuvring, the clandestine, the sly, the underhand, shamed her. She knew now the secret of the window-curtained door in Thrall's private office, opening on a narrow passage that led up a stair to another door opening in turn behind a wardrobe in a dressing-room—her dressing-room now these three years. And Jim Roberts knew of it, too; she wondered why, and reddened as she glanced toward a key that lay in an open desk-drawer.

"Oh!" she groaned, "how can I bear it! I love him! I love him! but it is not right that love should bring only dishonor! I do not need churchly vows to keep me loyal! I shall be faithful till I die; but I am a woman, and I long for the privileges and prerogatives that marriage gives—and that *she* receives!"

She thought that she hid her suffering—she tried to do so, and sometimes, in her work, forgot for a while her false position and the weight of the chains she had herself forged. But those brilliant blue eyes saw more than she guessed; and always, beside the growing hatred of his bitter bondage, there was the agony of fear that this young creature, made to win love, would weary of the double life, would some day be sought by one brave enough to take her to wife—knowing all there was to know! He saw glowing admiration in the eyes of men young and free, and he cursed [Pg 339] them in his heart *for* their freedom, for he knew he had no claim upon her, no legal tie bound her to him. She, the wife of his heart and soul, might turn from him. Her beautiful, cloudy face might flash into smiles for another, should she weary of him and of his secret love. Therefore *his* days, too, were often days of torment, and the blonde woman, who watched them both with cold, keen eyes, knew much and understood perfectly. She believed the taste for forbidden fruit was common to all men. Thrall's conduct in the past had done little to dispel that belief; but she knew now that his love for the beautiful, gifted girl, whose faith he longed to justify by wedding her, was a real—and oh! galling thought—a *loyal* love! In the past her suspicions had often borne fruit, and she could recall certain gas-lit, laughing trysts, very scant of secrecy, mere counterfeit amours, that he had lived to loathe, and she knew that this was no such caprice.

When he escaped for a little, she knew that he was at the feet of the girl whose sombre eyes were so woful that sometimes they moved her heart to a faint throb of pity. A nobler, warmer, more self-sacrificing woman would have set them free, to find a purer faith, to form happier ties. But Lettice, forced to realize the existence of this great mutual love, this loyal passion, watched, and slowly grew to hate—intensely, bitterly to hate—them both. Verily a noxious plant is illegitimate love, and its poison far-reaching!

"Oh! Dorothy!" cried Sybil to the silent walls; "dear little mother to be! I shall be so thankful when you can once more bring a breath of honesty, of every-day open frankness, into this house!" [Pg 340]

And then she heard a step, light but firm, coming from the back of the hall, and the blood rushed into her face as she sprang to her feet, for her fear was great lest the approaching man might read her grieving thoughts in her face.

He entered, and, tossing a bunch of violets to the table, came to her, and, taking her in his arms, buried his face in the cloudy, dark hair that had always tempted him. Presently he said: "I should have been here earlier, sweetheart, for I thought you would be lonely after your people's departure." (She looked gratefully at him.) "But Jim kept me; yes, he has broken loose again, and though I had someone take him home and look after him, I was so doubtful of his being able to play to-night that I gave his small part to an understudy, and that all took time."

"How good you are to that poor, worthless fellow! I don't believe any other man in the world would be so generous and so patient as you are."

But Thrall said quickly, almost sharply: "Don't—don't say that!" and turned away his face, while Sybil continued:

"But actors are so queer—actresses, too. They will hide malice under compliments; they will deliver innuendoes in a jest; they will make most injurious statements about one another; but let one of them be stricken down with sickness or trouble and every hand goes instantly into the pocket, even if it is already nearly empty, and the only feeling is sympathy, the only thought relief for the unfortunate. You are a generous people, Stewart!" [Pg 341]

"*You?*" he repeated, pointedly.

And she laughed, and answered: "Oh, well! *we* are generous—is that better?"

"Yes!—much!" he answered, and knelt at her feet.

"What are you doing there?" she asked.

"One kneels to a queen!" replied he. She laughed, and flushed a little. She had become actress enough to send out early for her papers. "And," he added, "particularly when one wishes to make an offering. This is an anniversary, beloved!"

Her color fled, for that was the one unsympathetic note that had ever sounded between them. She did not understand him in that one respect. To her it seemed almost indelicate to remind her of that day when she had forgiven. She was to understand him later; but now he saw the shadow on her face, and his interpretation was, she "regrets her generosity," and all his love shone appealing in his eyes as he took her hand, and, whispering, "In memory of your mercy, beloved," slipped a great ring upon her finger.

She glanced down at it, and a startled cry came from her lips. It was an opal—a marvel! a very wonder! It was not merely the play of color through the soft, milky translucence, the ghost of blue, the vivid flecks of green, the pale rose deepening into flashes of ruby red, the amber glow, but it was the strange quiver and throb in it that made it seem alive—uncanny! She looked at him questioningly. "Did he not know, then," she asked herself, "the superstition attached to this noblest, most fascinating gem, that he offered it as a love gift?" [Pg 342]

"See," he said, "how sharp the diamond scintillations are compared to this softened glory! Do you see that throbbing that keeps the colors all the time in play? That's my heart, beloved, as it quivers with pain and shame when, belonging to you utterly, I have to ignore you before the world. Do you guess how I suffer—I, who am bound—I, who am helpless! I live only by your mercy—for I love you with all my soul!"

And, woman-like, she hid her own grief, and comforted him, and arranged her violets and talked over their mutual triumphs and Dorothy's last note. For he had great regard for the gentle creature in whom he recognized great moral strength. And, as he was leaving, he looked at a trophy of small arms and weapons on the wall, and said: "This Turkish inlaid thing is rusting, Sybil, and this dagger—which is genuine—needs attention, too. Let Jane Penny bring them over to-night, with that bulldog revolver I left upstairs. If Jim is straightened up by that time he will clean the whole outfit to-morrow. The property-man's shooting-irons are all out of kilter, too. There'll be a good day's job to clean and oil them all, but it's the sort of pottering work Jim likes. Good-by, sweetheart! Take an hour's rest, dear, before going to the theatre. Beatrice needs to be well keyed up, you know." He kissed her lips and eyes and hair, and left her.

And she stood and cried: "He loves me! He has crowned me! I love him with my whole heart! I thank him from my very soul! But oh, what a position is mine! Unmarried—I am deprived of all freedom and girlish pleasures! A wife—I am denied the honors and prerogatives of marriage!" Her eyes fell upon the great opal, quivering, glowing, glinting! "He suffers, too," she said. "Poor [Pg 343]

Stewart!" and again she wondered if he knew the superstition attached to opals, and, turning, took the rusting weapons from the trophy. [Pg 344]

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FALL OF THE CURTAIN

Long before Sybil rose next morning Leslie Galt had left at the door a great bunch of lilacs, the very first spring blossoms from Dorothy's own garden, and with it a note. Stivers took them into the bedroom with the breakfast tray, and as Sybil put out her hand to take the letter Jane gave a cry of dismay. "For God's sake! is that thing real?" she asked, pointing to the splendid ring. "I—I thought last night it was an extra fine stage jewel. Do you mean to sit there with that unlucky stone just calling out for death and destruction, fire or flood or scandal or—or all of them together to come upon you? Take it off, I say! *take it off*! and let me carry it back, for, of course, it was Mr. Thrall who gave it to you! He must be off his head—and I'll tell him so!"

"Oh!" laughed Sybil, "do you mind it so much? No! I could not send it back, that would hurt the giver's feelings; besides, what possible harm can a thing so beautiful do to one?"

"H—uh!" snorted Stivers. "I suppose Mary Stuart thought opals beautiful, too, but they didn't help to keep her head on her shoulders!"

"But," argued Sybil, "the poor, lovely, tormented, blundering queen would have lost her royal head even if she had never owned an opal." [Pg 345]

"You don't know that," answered Stivers; "but you do know that she wore opals and lost it. My very own cousin had a little, weeny, footy bit of an opal scarf-pin given him, and wore it, like the fool he always was, and had his house burned over his head for his pains. Don't talk to me! I *know*! Wasn't a friend of my husband's given an opal, and while he was carrying it round in his clothes, making up his silly mind how to set it, didn't his mother-in-law, a great, bouncing, big, hearty woman, up and die?"

Sybil nearly strangled over a combination of coffee and laugh. "Oh, Mrs. Stivers," she exclaimed, "if you make that story public there will certainly be a boom in the sale of small opals—if one can believe the statements of the comic papers, at least."

"All right, Miss. You may laugh, but I'll watch my home closer than ever for fire or burglars. I'd as soon move into a new house on Friday, and I'd a sight rather break a looking-glass than wear that thing for an hour!" and she retired pretty thoroughly vexed.

Sybil touched the great, shimmering quiver of color with her lips, whispering: "Poor heart, that suffers for me!" And then, with the fresh odor of the lilacs about her, she opened the envelope which contained a note from Dorothy, enclosing a portion of a letter written by Mrs. Lawton within the hour of her arrival at the White house.

Dorrie wrote briefly, sending proudest congratulations to "the successful, admired, newly triumphant actress, who was yet her own dear Sybbie—sweet sister, all unchanged, in truth and love," and a tender assurance of her own well-being, of her hopeful, trustful waiting, knowing that whether she received death or life the gift would come from God, who never made mistakes. So she waited calmly. "It seems rather mean," she added, "to enclose a portion of mamma's 'note'—of six pages—but, Syb, I can't help it, I simply *can't*! I wouldn't let papa or Leslie know it for the world, but you will understand and not think it disrespectful. Do write, Sybbie, to your Dorothy!" [Pg 346]

"Yes," the fragment of Mrs. Lawton's letter read, "I'm afraid I overdid it a bit. Shopping, you know, is very fatiguing, even to one who like myself never loiters or hesitates. Anyway, if my looking-glass did not so flatly contradict me, I should call myself quite an old woman to-day. But let me get on to what I wish to say. I hate anyone who meanders—never meander, Dorothy. Though you are a married woman you should not be averse to a little advice now and then from one who watched over your infancy—and a very quiet, well-sleeping babe you were, too, quite different from Sybil, who was— Well, as I was saying, meeting Mr. Thrall—a man très comme il faut—as I have always said, I mentioned your hopes—he being a married man these years past, and most friendly in his inquiries. He, in offering congratulations, expressed the opinion that a gift of twins would be desirable, as it was easier to select names for two than for one, and family friction would be lessened in consequence. I confess I was startled, and 'er, well, not far from being vexed, and I plainly told him I hoped you would be guilty of no such vulgarity. You should have seen his eyes—very remarkable eyes, you must have noticed their amazing blueness—quite like the paler sapphires. Yes, he looked perfectly amazed. 'Vulgar?' he repeated. 'Could a Merivale-Merivale be guilty of vulgarity? You must surely know the Merivale-Merivales, Mrs. Lawton?' Imagine my haste to tell him that Mrs. Merivale-Merivale was the only child and heiress of my friend old Tom Bligh, who used to say she was so democratic that she would never be content till she had every Tom, Dick, and Harry in society about her. And people said she married Dick Merivale-Merivale so that she could help out her father's saying. And Mr. Thrall said: 'Dear me! and did you not know that she has twin boys, and that she calls them Tom and Harry? Quite clever, for society, is it not? Tom, Dick, and Harry, right in her own family, too!' My dear, I was [Pg 347]

never more taken aback! And then he went on to tell me of Lady Somebody-Somebody, of some sort of 'hurst,' in some shire in England, who has twin daughters, and drives about with them, and has them always mentioned as 'Lady So-and-So's lovely twins' in the society journals. I declare, I was quite startled; but fashions do change so, and I'm sure its no fault of mine that I have fallen so far behind the times—and been so out of everything. But I have hastened to write this all out for your comfort, in case you have any anxiety on that score. I don't suppose you have, but I frankly admit that I should myself have looked upon the simultaneous arrival of yourself and [Pg 348] Sybil as verging upon an impropriety. But different times—different manners, and there is no questioning the fact that twins, if not de rigueur, are at least genuinely fashionable now."

Peal after peal of laughter from Sybil brought Stivers to the door, pale and with distinctly frightened eyes. "In the name of heaven, what's the matter with you? Stop it! *stop it!* You're *fey*—that's what you are! Ill will come of it—now mind!"

"*Fey?*" repeated Sybil, gurgling still with laughter. "What is *fey*, Mrs. Stivers? Why, you look quite frightened!"

"You laugh in a room all by yourself! You're *fey*, and that means you're sort of possessed. It's an evil spirit of mischievous fun that takes hold of you just before a stroke of bad luck comes upon you. Lord knows you've naught more to do now than to get up and smash a looking-glass!"

"Don't be worried!" said Sybil, seeing the woman's distress! "I was not *fey*, because I had cause for laughter. It was this letter that amused me."

"But you laughed in a room by yourself," gloomily insisted Stivers, who would not be comforted, and removed the tray rather sullenly.

And Sybil laughed again and yet again, for she could not know that there was hurry and confusion at the old White house; that at the little Riverdale station, crouching at the foot of the hill beside the swift-running river, the quick tic-tic-tacking, and dot-dot-dot dashing were spelling out words of sorrow for her. But, later, as she rose from the piano and went to the window to look [Pg 349] out, a messenger boy on the steps reached far over and stole a flower from her balcony before he rang the bell; and she laughed again, because he so nearly landed on his head in his effort to reach the blossom.

She always remembered, with a sick misery, that she was laughing when she opened the telegram that said: "*Your mother has died in her sleep. Discovered an hour ago. Dorothy must not know. Come. Father.*"

She never remembered how she was made ready for the street. She seemed to recover her consciousness only as she found herself going into the theatre by the back way, and she wondered vaguely why she had not gone in the front. With the telegram crushed in her ungloved hand she had flown instantly to Stewart—in the first place, from the blind instinct that sends the stricken into the arms of the loved one for shelter, for comfort; and now, in the second place, she sought him for business reasons, so that he might have all the time possible in which to arrange matters theatrical during her necessary absence.

She made her hurried way to Thrall's private office—that little red-walled room, where she had first met him, and where her own picture as Juliet now reigned supreme.

An old cloth had been spread over the open desk, and on it lay a litter of oily rags, bits of wire, polishing powder, loose cartridges, several revolvers, a tiny pistol used by stage heroines, and Sybil's beautiful dagger.

Jim Roberts, pallid, puffy-eyed, and trembling visibly, sat there at work, and Thrall, seeing the great trickling drops of perspiration which the slightest effort brought out upon his pasty skin, [Pg 350] said: "Jim, either you must give that job up for to-day or you must take a nip to steady your nerves. You can't break short off after being on the rampage as you were yesterday."

But Jim lifted miserable eyes, and said, doggedly: "No! She—the Princess—might come in, and notice—" (He had not forgotten that remark about his fondness for cloves.)

"She's not at all likely to come in to-day, and if she did, she would only feel sorry for your recklessness." He turned, and, taking a handsome travelling-flask from a shelf, shook it, and smilingly announced: "Half full yet." He poured a pretty stiff drink into a glass, brought it to Jim, and, pointing to water standing on top of the desk, said: "There you are, old man—racer—chaser—everything to your hand, and, for heaven's sake, wipe your dripping face!"

Jim swallowed his liquor and resumed his work, asking, querulously: "Where is that chamois skin? I've hunted that infernal thing till my head is all a-buzz."

"Go to the box-office and get a new one," said Thrall. "There's a bundle of them in the drawer. Barney will give you one."

"No! no!" irritably replied Jim. "I want the one I've been using! I hate a new chamois; besides, how the devil could the thing disappear! I used it on that 'bulldog' of yours a while ago. You're a nice man to own a fine revolver like that, and let it get spotted and ate into with rust. You ought to carry a bargain-counter ninety-nine-and-a-half-cent sort of shooting-iron." [Pg 351]

Thrall laughed good-temperedly, and, picking up the revolver, said: "Well, you have cleaned and polished and oiled the old thing up in great shape." He stood looking down at the weapon, whose

white ivory handle and heavily nickled barrel and trimmings took nothing from its threatening look. Short, thick, heavy, the three-inch double barrel and the wide ugly muzzle were so suggestive that Thrall exclaimed: "By Jove! it's well named, for the bulldog is just what it reminds one of."

"Yes," answered Jim, still searching for the mislaid chamois; "that's a dog whose bark is not worse than his bite. Be a little careful, will you! That's a mighty easy trigger, and something less than ten-horse power will cock the thing full. Oh, damn! damn! where is that chamois?"

How cruel is the despotism of trifling circumstance! It is humiliating to think that a life's career—nay, even more than that—hung upon the finding or the losing of a dirty bit of leather!

Thrall "broke" the revolver to look at the cartridges, somehow expecting to see new ones, and remarked: "Oh, you've returned the old cartridges, I see?"

"Yes," replied Jim, fretfully; "but what of it? I haven't get any new 32s on hand, but the old ones will bore holes in a man that will serve every purpose. I wish I had an old silk handkerchief to polish this inlaid work with." And just then they heard the rustling of skirts, the tap of heels, and [Pg 352] Sybil was in the room.

Jim Roberts looked up, and, at sight of her white face and frightened eyes, his own expression changed so swiftly that Thrall was startled. The latter turned, and, in the instant of recognition, the thought flashed through him that, as Sybil had come without appointment, Barney, unwarned, might send anyone here that asked for him; and he said, surprisedly, even a little sharply: "Good heaven, child, what are you doing here?" and the girl moaned:

"Oh, Stewart! Stewart! the message! the awful message!" and crept to him and hid her face on his arm.

Roberts, weak and trembling, and with glaring eyes, made his way out, muttering something about "going to the office." Outside he held his head hard between his hands and leaned against the wall for support. "It's come," he said, "at last! Oh, damn him! It's so awfully sudden, too, but that's him all over—his love flaming sky-high one moment and black out the next!"

He groaned, and rolled his head miserably about. He had understood Sybil's words to be: "Your message—your awful message!" and that was enough to arouse the suspicions of the poor half-crazed creature. "'What are you doing here?' Curse him! I can remember how hard it was for you to get her here in the first place! It was coax and plead and promise then! Now, it's 'what are you doing here!' She is not like little Bess. She will be more likely to kill *him* than herself!" [Pg 353]

He started, and stood upright. "That must not be!" he said. "That would utterly ruin her young life! No, my beautiful! so pale—so frightened! Oh, I—" He broke off, and went shambling over to the box-office and asked for the chamois.

"In the drawer, there," said Barney, briefly.

"Hand one out," said Jim; "my hands are all oily and grimy from cleaning that arsenal in there. I can't touch anything without leaving a mark."

Barney handed out the article, and Jim deliberately returned to the private office. As he entered he drew the heavy portière over the closed door and passed to the desk in the corner and sat down.

Stewart had been much shocked at the blow that had fallen so suddenly upon Sybil, and had shown her such tender sympathy and love that at last the tears had rushed to her hot eyes, and now, within the circle of his arm, her head against his shoulder, she stood and sobbed piteously. Neither of them noticed Jim, and then suddenly, for the first time, she put into words something of her longing for his open protection and love. "Oh," she cried, "must I go there alone? Must I face this terrible thing without you?"

Jim heard, and his face was dreadful. A pale fire shone in his watery eyes, his nostrils dilated and quivered rapidly, his upper lip drew tremblingly upward at one corner, he had all the look of a helpless cur about to pass into a convulsion.

Sybil had but spoken Thrall's own thought. He, too, was thinking how hard it was that he could not take a husband's place by the side of this stricken creature of his love, and he groaned but [Pg 354] made no answer. And then, poor child, the thought came to her of some other woman acting with him. A jealous pain was in her voice as she cried: "And you will put another woman in my place, Stewart? Oh, Stewart, how can I bear it all?"

There came from the corner a strange sort of snarl. Jim Roberts was on his feet, a dull red had spread over his face, his very eyeballs were suffused. Thrall turned his head, saw, and, with all his strength, flung Sybil from him, and simultaneously with Jim's "No, damn you, you'll put no other woman in her place!" the "bulldog" barked, and the bullet crashed into the breast where her head had rested.

For an instant there was utter silence; a smoke, an evil odor, and three white faces—that was all! Thrall, who had clapped his hand over the wound, stood tall and erect a moment, then he began to settle together, as it were, and slowly he sank backward upon the couch behind him, his head against the wall, his right hand partly supporting him. He was perfectly ghastly, but entirely conscious, and calm and self-controlled to an astounding degree. He tried to draw a long breath,

and then a new horror was in the room—the horror of that agonized breathing. He spoke, painfully, word by word, and his thought was all for the woman he loved, who lay against the wall opposite, her arms outstretched on either side just as she had staggered there when Stewart flung her to safety.

"Jim—the—private—door—get—Princess—away—quick! Save—her—from—scandal!" [Pg 355]

And Jim, falling back instantly into the old subserviency and obedience, sprang to the curtained door, that in opening outward took with it the pedestal and statuette of the little "Love," which were securely fastened to it, so that when the door was closed again the room looked utterly undisturbed. Pushing the door open he flew to Sybil, who had never moved, and, catching her about the waist, dragged her toward it. As she was passing Thrall he took his hand from his breast and caught at her fingers. She shuddered at the touch, so cold, so clammy, so—so wet!

"Beloved!" his eyes looked enormous in his pallid face. "Beloved!—I—sinned—against—you—but—it—was—from—love! Forgive—can—you?"

A sort of surprise came upon her face, and she said, simply, as if that answered completely his question: "I love you, dear heart!"

One flash of the old triumphant light came to his eyes; then, though Death's grim face looked at him, over her shoulder, the tormenting jealousy of the passionate lover flared up in him, and he gasped, painfully: "For—all—time—beloved?"

She bent and kissed his eyes, kissed his gasping clay-cold lips, and answered: "I love you for time and for eternity!"

And Roberts, whispering: "Quick! Someone will come!" lifted her in his arms and carried her to the passage and set her down. As the door was closing on her she thought she heard Stewart say: "The word—the ruby—" and then she was hurrying up to her dressing-room, passing through it and down to the stage entrance, where there was no doorman at that hour, and so out into the street. [Pg 356]

At the corner she glanced down toward the theatre, and saw a hatless man tearing madly out of the front door. It was Barney. He said something as he ran. Two people stopped, turned, and stared at the building, and so formed the nucleus of the swiftly gathering, traffic-impeding crowd—that mushroom growth, so common to excitable Broadway.

Her knees trembled threateningly beneath her, faintness seemed stealing over her senses. She dimly saw a cab, working its way up the street. The man lifted his whip inquiringly; she raised her bare hand to summon him, and then, there in the open street, she gave a cry of horror, fortunately drowned by other sounds, for that was the hand Thrall had clutched, and his chill, blood-wet fingers had left three close lines of red, that, circling her fingers, led straight across the great opal. She gasped out her street and number, and, stumbling into the cab, she heard an excited passer-by remark: "That's Sybil Lawton! I'll bet a dollar she was on her way to the theatre!" And as the cab passed on he continued: "Well, she couldn't get through that crowd! I 'spose a policeman has told her what's happened down there. We had seats for to-night, too—I guess they'll redeem the tickets."

And ten minutes later the rumor was running like fire in dry grass: "That Sybil Lawton had been shopping and a policeman stopped her, and, without warning or preparation of any kind, had informed her of the shooting of her manager, and she collapsed, and was driven home in a cab." [Pg 357]

Murder became suicide—suicide became accident, before the clang of the ambulance-gong sent the depressing shivers through nerves that would thrill with pleasurable excitement at the sound of the fire-gong. Then a group of men came out of the front door, and hats came quickly off when those nearest caught a glimpse of a marble-white face, with long, inky lashes clinging close to ghastly cheeks.

For, between those dreadful whistling breaths, Thrall had warned Jim, word by word, that it was "an accident," and explained that Jim, having supposed the old cartridges were withdrawn, snapped the revolver, standing at close range, adding: "Keep—steady—stick—to—story—Jim—for—her—sake! Now—call—make—big—row! I'm—gone!"

And Jim, conscious of an awful blunder, obeying to the letter, as Thrall fainted, tore away the heavy portière that had helped so much to deaden the sound of the shot, dashed open the door, and, like a madman, shouted: "A doctor! a doctor! for God's sake, Barney! I've shot Thrall! I have! I have! Oh, run! run! I'll call a policeman myself!"

He was obeying orders—he was making "a big row," but suddenly he thought of Sybil. "Oh, my beautiful!" he cried; "I meant to serve you, and I've robbed you instead!" And, as the policeman advanced toward him, he fell forward in the fit that had threatened him all the day. Yes, Jim was obedient to the last—he made "a big row"! [Pg 358]

The next day, almost at the same hour, the pale woman who had watched at Thrall's side almost unwinkingly left the room for a moment to confer with her maid. "English crêpe," she whispered, "of course. The heaviest and best is always the cheapest in the long run."

It was only a moment's absence, but the long lashes on the stricken man's ghastly face lifted, the hand went to the wounded breast. With the instinct of the actor, who always considers effect, he

thought gratefully that the hemorrhage had been internal, and that he had not been an offensive-looking object. He turned his eyes to the side where Lettice had sat and watched. She was not there. His eyes widened with pleasure. He rose suddenly—the effort was a mistaken one. He realized it in a moment. There was a red spot creeping out on his shirt, and—and a salty taste in his mouth. Yet he smiled, almost maliciously, as he thought: "I am escaping her, after all!"

Then he knew. He shivered. "Sybil!" he said; "beloved!"

The door opened—the clock was striking down-stairs—from a near room came the whir of a sewing-machine—Stewart Thrall was dead. [Pg 359]

CHAPTER XXVIII

"THOU KNOWEST!"

Mrs. Van Camp put ease and comfort from her, placed Poll in his cage, and left a bunch of white grapes dangling from its top, hoping that the fruit might attract his attention sufficiently to stop his hoarse: "'Omeo! 'Omeo! dead! dead!" that now was more distressing to listen to than his most distinct profanity. She had dressed herself for the street, and in her character of god-mother hastened to Sybil's side. Then, finding her prostrated, and, for the time being, utterly incapable of action of any kind, like the loyal friend she was, she went on up to Riverdale at once to the assistance of John Lawton and Leslie Galt; who, dazed and confused, seemed as helpless as two male babes, until the bright, clever, capable old lady took charge and gave orders and made suggestions.

Neither she nor Leslie liked the strange blank look in poor old John Lawton's eyes. The blow had stunned him seemingly. Yet he was observant enough about anything affecting his Letitia, and Sybil Van Camp had felt tears springing to her eyes when, having to enter Mrs. Lawton's sleeping-room, she saw John catch up the little bottle of rouge vinaigre from the toilet-table and hide it in his pocket. "Poor, loyal old gentleman!" she thought; "as if all her world did not know that Letitia Lawton rouged!" [Pg 360]

The absence of his worshipped children made the burden of his grief almost unbearable. He knew that Dorothy was to be deceived, if possible, for a few days, so that she might have undiminished strength and courage for the great trial she was approaching so rapidly; but Sybil—"where was Sybil?" That was all he said, muttering the words very low.

He could give no assistance to anyone, could not tell where anything could be found; only he could not be kept away from that white, still thing, that he looked at with such blank, piteously faded eyes, as though he were trying to trace in it some resemblance to the light, frivolous but vivid Letitia, who for twenty-four years had talked him to sleep o' nights, and whose silence now was so sudden and so cruel.

Once Leslie, coming softly in to try again to lead the old man away, overheard him murmuring: "She does not come—they are both independent of me now. I—I—think I'll just go with you Letitia, my dear!" and, frightened, he turned and sought Mrs. Van Camp.

And that wise woman answered: "You see, you were in error trying to hide this disaster to Mr. Thrall from him. He thinks Sybil neglects him. The shock will not break him entirely, as you imagine, but it will arouse him to a desire to help his child."

"Right!" exclaimed Leslie. "That's the dear old chap all over! We must make him believe her welfare depends wholly upon his protection and care—or, indeed, Mrs. Van Camp, I fear he will—well, let us say, let go!" [Pg 361]

And so the kindly conspirators planned that, as the death of Mr. Thrall could scarcely be kept from Dorothy's knowledge, and if she learned of it she would think her mother was with Sybil for a few days, the shattered old man Lawton should be made to believe Sybil's welfare depended entirely upon him; and Sybil,—poor child!—crushed as she was, would see at a glance that her father's life depended upon her loving companionship. And then they led the old gentleman from the darkened room out to the porch, and, each holding one of his hands, they told him of the accidental shooting of Mr. Thrall, of the crushing effect of the double blow upon Sybil. But before their story was done he was drawing his hands away and crying: "My little girl! my little girl! I must go to you at once!" and it required the repeated assurance of Mrs. Van Camp that his child would come to him by an early train next morning to keep him from hurrying to the city.

When Mrs. Van Camp had left the red brick house with the flower-filled windows Sybil had raised herself from her pillows and had struck the small gong-bell on the stand by her bed sharply—twice—three times. And Stivers called up to her: "In a moment, Miss Sybil!" but did not appear; and again the gong sounded, and at last the woman came with a cup of black coffee in her hand. "It's no use frowning, Miss—no use waving your hand! That doctor gave you an opiate last night, and now you just—no! I won't listen to what you want until you swallow down this coffee—to steady your nerves. No! Miss—no! He's not gone yet—there's no 'extra' out at all. That's some pedler you hear. Take it down now, all of it. There! You'll be the better for that. Now, what was it you wanted?" [Pg 362]

And Sybil fastened her woful eyes on the woman's face, and begged: "Mrs. Stivers, will you bring a jeweler here to my room, as quickly as possible?"

"A—a—what?" stammered Stivers, "a jeweler—no, I can't leave you to go away over——"

"But," the girl interrupted, "anyone will do—any working jeweler. Right in the next avenue there is a little shop—you won't be gone more than fifteen minutes. You must, indeed you *must*!"

"O-o-oh!" thought Stivers; "she wants to get rid of that opal, now all the damage is done." Aloud she warned: "If you're going to try to do any business, you don't want a little tu-penny-ha'penny creature like that to deal with. Well! well! I'm going—but suppose the bell rings? Yes, I'll hurry!"

White and worn-looking, Sybil fell back upon the pillow, her tumbled dark hair clouding over her brows, her hot eyes staring before her, and every nerve tense, waiting for the "E-e-extray! e-e-extray!" at whose sound her world of love would crumble to nothingness.

Had she or had she not heard Stewart gasp "The word—the *ruby*—?" If she had, then the word must have had an immense significance for him, and suddenly her dumb, inert despair was broken by an intense longing to know what the word was that even rapidly approaching death [Pg 363] had not driven from his recollection. For Sybil did not try to deceive herself. Anyone hearing that awful breathing must have realized that it meant a pierced lung, and she had been hopeless from the first. She felt that the explanation given by Thrall and Roberts was not true—that the shooting had not been accidental; but she supposed it had been the motiveless act of a drink-maddened man. For Jim Roberts had never breathed a hint—drunk or sober—of the miserable fate of his young sister, still less of his piteous passion of love for herself. So, in the absence of reasonable motive, she charged the dreadful deed to drunkenness.

Stivers had eagerly seized upon the cue given by rumor, and declared that Sybil had been shopping, and was going toward the theatre, when, etc., etc.; and she had carefully drilled her mistress in this story, before the arrival of Mrs. Van Camp.

And now the unhappy girl lay there straining her ears for that cry of "Extra!" that she so dreaded, and tormenting herself with thoughts of what she might have said and done yesterday, had she not been so stupefied with terror. At last she heard Stivers opening the door, and presently she was showing in a sandy-haired, hooked-nosed young man, with thick red lips and an appraising eye, that seemed at a glance to put a price upon each article in the room. She took the glittering diamond heart from her neck, and, placing it in the man's hand, asked him to remove the back. She would not listen to his proposal to take it to his shop—it must be done there, even at the risk of scratching the gold. Scratch or dent it, if he must, but open it he should! At last the back came [Pg 364] off, and the man remarked: "I think there's something engraved here." But Sybil's hand-clasp covered the inscription. "Wait in the other room," she commanded.

She bolted the door, flew to the window, and, catching the light upon the metal, read the word she had worn upon her breast three years—the word Stewart said made the sole value of the gem—read and fell upon her knees, and buried her face in the pillow and sobbed and cried: "I understand you better now, dear heart!" and kissed again and again the four little letters that formed that one significant word, "Wife."

An hour later the expected cry arose in the street. Hoarse bawling went up one side and down the other, and Sybil knew the man who had been her idol, dearer, more precious than the whole great world, he whose love had been as the very breath of life to her, was gone away forever! And, lying with the locket pressed against her lips, she breathed: "Wife, you said, dear heart? Then your widow now, and as loyal in the shadow of your death as I was in the sunlight of your life!"

In the passenger list there had appeared the names of Mr. J. Lawton Bassett and daughter, and the pair thus registered had gone on board over night because of the very early hour of sailing, they said, but it was really an effort to avoid public notice; and all the bell-ringing, pulling, hauling, rushing, and trampling were over and comparative quiet reigned before John Lawton [Pg 365] and Sybil, his daughter, ascended to the deck to look about them and with sad eyes to take farewell of the great city they loved, with its rapidly softening outlines, blending, blurring into a grayish mass touched with a few strong darks, many sharp, white lights, and here and there a gleam from the golden cross of some sky-piercing spire. As they leaned against the rail, the girl with cloudy hair, sombre eyes, and black-robed figure clinging to the arm of the pale old gentleman, also in mourning, they made a pathetic picture. Silently they watched—each was trying to hide grief for the other's sake. It was well for Sybil that this helpless old father needed her devoted care, for an awful temptation had come to her in her despair. "Oh," she cried, now in her heart, "if I only had Dorothy's faith in God! Dorothy's hope for the beautiful hereafter! But," she mused bitterly, "Dorothy has not sinned, while I—and yet, if God is what she believes Him, He could pity even me!" Then she shivered, for, looking out over the water, she thought of the exultant old anthem, and quoting "The sea is His, and He made it!" she felt suddenly that she was too small, too insignificant, for her cry of repentance to be noticed.

The wind was sharpening. Her thoughts came back to her father. They had been out there a very long time—too long, and—and what was that man—the purser—doing? Handing an envelope to a big man already in cap and ulster, and calling—could she be right—calling: "Miss Lawton? Is a

Miss Sybil Lawton here?" The pilot had been dropped half an hour or more ago. Why—why, what was this? An envelope thrust into her unwilling hand, and the purser was away, calling for a Mr. Pemberton Something, and waving one last missive aloft for its claimant. [Pg 366]

"Dorothy!" gasped the old man, and closed his eyes a moment.

Sybil's nervous fingers tore the envelope, and opened the bit of yellow paper. She read breathlessly, looked about her, passed her hand over her eyes, read again. And then she flung her arms about her father's trembling, frail old body, buried her face in his breast, and laughed—laughed with tears running down her cheeks—laughed and blessed God for his goodness! Then, looking up at her father's quivering mouth, she put her fingers on it, saying: "Don't, dada, it's good news—about Dorothy!"

A smile came to his lips, an eager light to his eyes. "Why! why!" he said. "I expected the news would be awaiting us at Liverpool; but really, I——"

Again that hysterical laughter shook the girl. "You're surprised, darling!" she said, "but wait till you hear the message."

> "*Sybil Letitia and Dorothy Grace have arrived. Mother and both babies well. Look for cable. Leslie.*"

John Lawton straightened up suddenly. "W-w-what!" stammered he. "Sybil Letitia? W-w-y? Who on earth—Dorothy Grace? Why, but that's two, Sybil! Two's twins! Well, I am astonished—at Dorothy!" And then, before she could answer, a pleased look came on his face, as he continued: "Poor Letitia would have thought that so fashionable! I wish she knew, dear! She so loved to be within the fashion!" He drew Sybil close to him, and she thought with sick longing of that stronger arm that used to circle her about so tenderly. He looked backward as he murmured: "Little Dorrie's babies!" Then, glancing down at the dark, drooping head without reason, a conviction came to him that Dorothy's children would have to be Sybil's children, too. [Pg 367]

She raised her woful eyes, and, meeting his pitying glance, answered the look, saying: "Dorothy never failed yet to share her joys with me, dada!"

He turned his eyes again toward the land they were leaving. "Sybil Letitia—that's for you and wife. Dorothy Grace—that's for Dorrie and Leslie's mother. I—didn't he say anything about the color of their eyes, dear? Strange!" he murmured, discontentedly. "He might have said *that* much!"

"Probably we shall learn all you wish at Liverpool, dear!" she patiently answered, while her heart contracted with a new loneliness. They had fled together from two freshly made graves, but already it was evident that baby hands were tuning the worn old heart-strings anew; that these two creatures, with eyes full of knowledge from the great Beyond, held speechless till they should forget from whence they came, and allowed only wordless cries, were yet summoning him, with almost irresistible power, back, back!

"Do you not think, daughter, that brief trips abroad at frequent intervals are as beneficial as one more prolonged visit?" he naïvely asked, his pale old eyes looking quite eagerly at her. [Pg 368]

"Yes, dear," she answered him, and then she led him away, fearing the effect on him of the cold and the increasing motion. Still he looked backward, and she persuadingly said: "Go, now, dear, and as soon as you are safely in your berth I'll come to you, and we will talk——"

"About Dorothy's babies—our little twins?"

"Yes, dada! All about them—their names and probable color, probable weight, everything we can think of!" And then she went back and looked long out over the vast gray, pathless expanse. "'The sea is His, and He made it!' What inconceivable power! And yet that mighty Creator noted the fall of a sparrow. Oh!" she thought, as she pressed the jewel to her breast till it hurt the tender flesh. "I—who am widowed for all my life—I thank you for your mercy and goodness in bringing safe and happy deliverance to my beloved sister! And humbly I beseech you now, to deliver me my soul! For I am a sinful woman—troubled and heavy, for that we lost our way through love! But now I cannot bear my woe alone! Help me, O mighty and powerful One, hereafter to live according to Thy will! Purify me in heart and mind, that I may be a fit companion for those little ones you have sent into our lives!"

She, too, began to feel a longing for sight and touch of those precious mysteries—Dorrie's babies. Stewart had been so anxious for Dorothy's welfare. She pressed her locket closer. "Oh!" she thought, "how I will love them! Sybil Letitia—Dorothy Grace! Yes, you are very nice and stately, and will look well upon the records, and, later on, upon marriage cards; but, dear little gifts, you will answer, all your baby years at least, to the tenderly commonplace Sybbie and Dorrie, so familiar to a Lawton nursery, and will doubtless be as hardy, happy, and sturdy as Lawton-Galt babies ought to be! And oh, if you thrive and are spared to the years of your sweet budding, you shall, by your right divine, be taught frankly and by high authority those great truths that are too often learned only in degrading secrecy from unworthy lips. Do I not know the danger, the cruelty, of sending forth the young in the innocence of utter ignorance! But you, my Dorrie's little daughters, shall be taught to look forward to some proud day in your girlhood when, as a guerdon for patient waiting and unhesitating obedience, you shall receive from reverent lips knowledge of the mysteries of life and love—of the almost divine honor of a perfectly pure womanhood! So shall propinquity be as naught; so no moment of strange, overwhelming [Pg 369]

weakness, no sudden flaring up of impulse, shall have power to bewilder and confuse you, to your harm! And thus, knowing something of both your weakness and your strength, it will not be in the innocence of ignorance that you will face the world, but with the clear-eyed, pure-hearted innocence of wisdom!"

Just then Sybil's skirts snapped in the wind, and whipped close about her ankles. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Papa! I must go to papa!" She smiled faintly as she thought, "While he has been waiting the babies have grown up into lovely womanhood." [Pg 370]

One more long look she gave over the heaving, restless, gray sea, and suddenly a very agony of grief swept over her. She bowed her head. "I can't help it," she breathed; "I repent of my sin, yet I still love and long for him!"

She pressed the locket (with the word) closer. "But I will pray on, all my life; for"—she raised great tear-brimmed eyes to heaven—"to understand is to pardon, and 'Thou knowest'!"

THE END.

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