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Its Silver Lining, by Kate Trimble Sharber**

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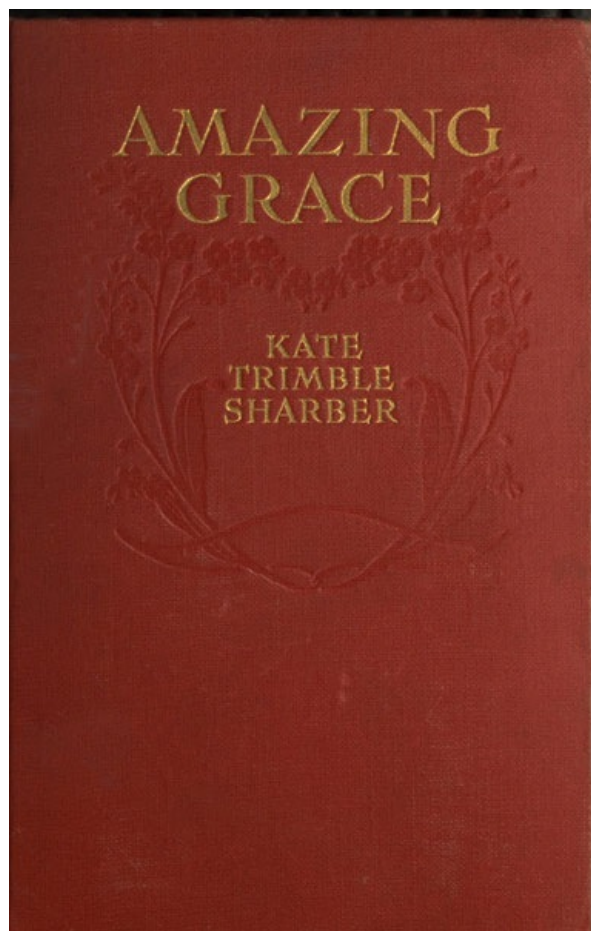
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AMAZING GRACE, WHO PROVES THAT
VIRTUE HAS ITS SILVER LINING ***

Transcriber's Note:

Obvious typographical errors have been corrected. Inconsistent spelling and hyphenation in the original document have been preserved.



AMAZING GRACE



I took up the first one

AMAZING GRACE

Who Proves That Virtue Has Its Silver Lining

By
KATE TRIMBLE SHARBER

Author of
THE ANNALS OF ANN, AT THE AGE OF EVE, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
R. M. CROSBY

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TO
LAURA NORVELL ELLIOTT
WHO HAS THE OLD LETTERS—
AND KEEPS THEM

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AMAZING GRACE

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CHAPTER I

1

STRAINED RELATIONS

Some people, you will admit, can absorb experience in gentle little homeopathic doses, while others require it to be shot into them by hypodermic injections.

Certainly my Dresden-china mother up to the time of my birth had been forced to take this bitter medicine in every form, yet she had never been known to profit by it. She would not, it is true, fly in the very face of Providence, but she *would* nag at its coat tails.

"You might as well name this child 'Praise-the-Lord,' and be done with it!" complained the rich Christie connection (which mother had always regarded as outlaws as well as in-laws), shaking its finger across the christening font into mother's boarding-school face on the day of my

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baptism. "Of course all the world knows you're *glad* she's posthumous, but—"

"But with Tom Christie only six weeks in spirit-land it isn't decent!" Cousin Pollie finished up individually.

"Besides, good families don't name their children for abstract things," Aunt Hannah put in. "It—well, it simply isn't done."

"A woman who never does anything that isn't done, never does anything worth doing," mother answered, through pretty pursed lips.

"But, since you must be freakish, why not call her Prudence, or Patience—to keep Oldburgh from wagging its tongue in two?" Aunt Louella suggested.

Oldburgh isn't the town's name, of course, but it's a descriptive alias. The place itself is, unfortunately, the worst overworked southern capital in fiction. It is one of the Old South's "types," boasting far more social leaders than sky-scrapers—and you can't suffer a blow-out on *any* pike near the city's limits that isn't flanked by a college campus.

"Oldburgh knows how I feel," mother replied. "If this baby had been a boy I should have named him Theodore—gift of God—but since she's a girl, her name is *Grace*."

She said it smoothly, I feel sure, for her Vere de Vere repose always jutted out like an iceberg into a troubled sea when there was a family squall going on.

"*All* right!" pronounced two aunts, simultaneously and acidly.

"*All right!*" chorused another two, but Cousin Pollie hadn't given up the ship.

"Just name a girl Faith, Hope or Natalie, if you want her to grow up freckle-faced and marry a ribbon clerk!" she threatened. "Grace is every bit as bad! It is indicative! It proclaims what you think of her—what you will expect of her—and just trust her to disappoint you!"

Which is only too true! You may be named Fannie or Bess without your family having anything up its sleeve, but it's an entirely different matter when you're named for one of the prismatic virtues. You know then that you're expected to take an A. B. degree, mate with a millionaire and bring up your children by the Montessori method.

"Bet Gwace 'ud ruther be ducked 'n cwistened, anyhow!" observed Guilford Blake, my five-year-old betrothed.—Not that we were Hindus and believed in infant marriage exactly! Not that! We were simply southerners, living in that portion of the South where the principal ambition in life is to "stay put"—where everything you get is inherited, tastes, mates and demijohns—where blood is thicker than axle-grease, and the dividing fence between your estate and the next is properly supposed to act as a seesaw basis for your amalgamated grandchildren.—Hence this early occasion for "Enter Guilford."

"My daughter is not going to disappoint me," mother declared, as she motioned for Guilford's mother to come forward and keep him from profaning the water in the font with his little celluloid duck.

"Don't be too sure," warned Cousin Pollie.

"Well, I'll—I'll risk it!" mother fired back. "And if you must know the truth, I couldn't express my feelings of gratitude—yes, I said *gratitude*—in any other name than Grace. I have had a wonderful blessing lately, and I am going to give credit where it is due! It was nothing less than an act of heavenly grace that released me!"

At this point the mercury dropped so suddenly that Cousin Pollie's breath became visible. Only six weeks before my father had died—of delirium tremens. It was a case of "the death wound on his gallant breast the last of *many* scars," but the Christies had never given mother any sympathy on that account. He had done nothing worse, his family considered, than to get his feet tangled up in the line of least resistance. Nearly every southern man born with a silver spoon in his mouth discards it for a straw to drink mint julep with!

"Calling her the whole of the doxology isn't going to get that Christie look off her!" father's family sniffed, their triumph answering her defiant outburst. "She is the living image of Uncle Lancelot!"

You'll notice this about in-laws. If the baby is like their family their attitude is triumphant—if it's like anybody else on the face of the earth their manner is distinctly accusing.

"'Lancelot!'" mother repeated scornfully. "If they had to name him for poetry why didn't they call him Lothario and be done with it!"

The circle again stiffened, as if they had a spine in common.

"Certainly it isn't becoming in you to train this child up with a disrespectful feeling toward Uncle Lancelot," some one reprimanded quickly, "since she gives every evidence of being very much like him in appearance."

"My child like that notorious Lancelot Christie!" mother repeated, then burst into tears. "Why she's a Moore, I'll have you understand—from here—down to *here!*"

She encompassed the space between the crown of my throbbing head and the soles of my kicking

feet, but neither the tears nor the measurements melted Cousin Pollie.

"A Moore! Bah! Why, you needn't expect that she'll turn out anything like you. A Lydia Languish mother always brings forth a caryatid!"

"A what?" mother demanded frenziedly, then remembering that Cousin Pollie had just returned from Europe with guide-books full of strange but not necessarily insulting words, she backed down into her former assertion. "She's a Moore! She's the image of my revered father."

"There's something in that, Pollie," admitted Aunt Louella, who was the weak-kneed one of the sisters. "Look at the poetic little brow and expression of spiritual intelligence!"

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"But what a combination!" Aunt Hannah pointed out. "As sure as you're a living woman this mouth and chin are like Uncle Lancelot!—Think of it—Jacob Moore and Lancelot Christie living together in the same skin!"

"Why, they'll tear the child limb from limb!"

This piece of sarcasm came from old great-great-aunt, Patricia Christie, who never took sides with anybody in family disputes, because she hated them one and all alike. She rose from her chair now and hobbled on her stick into the midst of the battle-field.

"Let me see! Let me see!"

"She's remarkably like Uncle Lancelot, aunty," Cousin Pollie declared with a superior air of finality.

"She's a thousand times more like my father than I, myself, am," poor little mother avowed stanchly.

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"Then, all I've got to say is that it's a devilish bad combination!" Aunt Patricia threw out, making faces at them impartially.

And to pursue the matter further, I may state that it was! All my life I have been divided between those ancient enemies—cut in two by a Solomon's sword, as it were, because no decision could be made as to which one really owned me.

You believe in a "dual personality"? Well, they're mine! They quarrel within me! They dispute! They pull and wrangle and seesaw in as many different directions as a party of Cook tourists in Cairo—coming into the council-chamber of my conscience to decide everything I do, from the selection of a black-dotted veil to the emancipation of the sex—while I sit by as helpless as a bound-and-gagged spiritual medium.

"They're not going to affect her future," mother said, but a little gasp of fear showed that if she'd been a Roman Catholic she would be crossing herself.

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"Of course not!" Aunt Patricia answered. "It's all written down, anyhow, in her little hand. Let me see the lines of her palm!"

"Her feet's a heap cuter!" Guilford advised, but the old lady untwisted my tight little fist.

"Ah! This tells the story!"

"What?" mother asked, peering over eagerly.

"Nothing—nothing, except that the youngster's a Christie, sure enough! All heart and no head."

Mother started to cry again, but Aunt Patricia stopped her.

"For the lord's sake hush—here comes the minister! Anyhow, if the child grows up beautiful she may survive it—but heaven help the woman who has a big heart and a big nose at the same time."

Then, with this christening and bit of genealogical gossip by way of introduction, the next milestone in my career came one day when the twentieth century was in its wee small figures.

"I hate Grandfather Moore and Uncle Lancelot Christie, both!" I confided to Aunt Patricia upon that occasion, having been sent to her room to make her a duty visit, as I was home for the holidays—a slim-legged sorority "pledge"—and had learned that talking about the Past, either for or against, was the only way to gain her attention. "I hate them both, I say! I wish you could be vaccinated against your ancestors. Are they in you to stay?"

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I put the question pertly, for she was not the kind to endure timidity nor hushed reverence from her family connections. She was a woman of great spirit herself, and she called forth spirit in other people. A visit with her was more like a bomb than a benediction.

"Hate your ancestors?"

At this time she was perching, hawk-eyed and claw-fingered, upon the edge of the grave, but she always liked and remembered me because I happened to be the only member of the family who didn't keep a black bonnet in readiness upon the wardrobe shelf.

"I hate that grandfather and Uncle Lancelot affair! Don't you think it's a pity I couldn't have had a little say-so in that business?"

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"Yes—no—I don't know—ouch, my knee!" she snapped. "What a chatterbox you are, Grace! I've

got rheumatism!"

"But I've got 'hereditary tendencies,'" I persisted, "and chloroform liniment won't do any good with my ailment. I wish I need never hear my family history mentioned again."

"Then, you shouldn't have chosen so notable a lineage," she exclaimed viciously. "Your Grandfather Moore, as you know, was a famous divine—"

"I know—and Uncle Lancelot Christie was an equally famous infernal," I said, for the sake of varying the story a little. I was so tired of it.

She stared, arrested in her recital.

"What?"

"Well, if you call a minister a divine, why shouldn't you call a gambler an infernal?"

"Just after the Civil War," she kept on, with the briefest pause left to show that she ignored my interruption, "your grandfather did all in his power—although he was no kin to me, I give him credit for that—he did all in his power to re-establish peace between the states by preaching and praying across the border." 13

"And Uncle Lancelot accomplished the feat in half the time by flirting and marrying," I reminded her.

She turned her face away, to hide a smile I knew, for she always concealed what was pleasant and displayed grimaces.

"Well, I must admit that when Lancelot brought home his third Ohio heiress—"

"The other two heiresses having died of neglect," I put in to show my learning.

"—many southern aristocrats felt that if the Mason and Dixon line had not been wiped away it had at least been broken up into dots and dashes—like a telegraph code."

I smiled conspicuously at her wit, then went back to my former stand. I was determined to be firm about it. 14

"I don't care—I hate them both! Nagging old crisscross creatures!"

She looked at me blankly for a moment, then:

"Grace, you amaze me!" she said.

But she mimicked mother's voice—mother's hurt, helpless, moral-suasion voice—as she said it, and we both burst out laughing.

"But, honest Injun, aunty, if a person's got to carry around a heritage, why aren't you allowed to choose which one you prefer?" I asked; then, a sudden memory coming to me, I leaped to my feet and sprang across the room, my gym shoes sounding in hospital thuds against the floor. I drew up to where three portraits hung on the opposite wall. They represented an admiral, an ambassador and an artist.

"Why can't you adopt an ancestor, as you can a child?" I asked again, turning back to her.

"Adopt an ancestor?"

Her voice was trembling with excitement, which was not brought about by the annoyance of my chatter, and as I saw that she was nodding her head vigorously, I calmed down at once and regretted my precipitate action, for the doctor had said that any unusual exertion or change of routine would end her. 15

"I only meant that I'd prefer these to grandfather and Uncle Lancelot," I explained soothingly, but her anxiety only increased.

"Which one?" she demanded in a squeaky voice which fairly bubbled with a "bully-for-you" sound. "*Which one*, Grace?"

"Him," I answered.

"They're all him!" she screamed impatiently.

"I mean the artist."

At this she tried to struggle to her feet, then settled back in exhaustion and drew a deep breath.

"Come here! Come here quick!" she panted weakly.

"Yes, 'um."

She wiped away a tear, in great shame, for she was not a weeping woman.

"Thank God!" she said angrily. "Thank God! That awful problem is settled at last! I knew I couldn't have a moment's peace a-dying until I had decided." 16

"Decided what?" I gasped in dismay, for I was afraid from the look in her eyes that she was

"seeing things." "Shall I call mother, or—some one?"

"Don't you dare!" she challenged. "Don't you leave this room, miss. It's *you* that I have business with!"

"But I haven't done a thing!" I plead, as weak all of a sudden as she was.

"It's not what you've done, but what you *are*," she exclaimed. "You're the only member of this family that has an idea which isn't framed and hung up! Now, listen! I'm going to leave you something—something very precious. Do you know about that artist over there—James Mackenzie Christie—our really famous ancestor—*my* great-uncle, who has been dead these sixty years, but will always be immortal? Do you know about him?"

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"Yes—I know!"

"Well, I'm going to leave—those letters—those terrible love-letters to *you*!"

I drew back, as if she'd pointed a pistol straight at me.

"But they're the skeleton in the closet," I repeated, having heard it expressed that way all my life.

She was angry for a moment, then she began laughing reminiscently and rocking herself backward and forward slowly in her chair. Her face was as detached and crazy as Ophelia's over her botany lesson, when she gets on your nerves with her: "There is pansies, that's for thoughts," and so forth.

"Yes, he left a skeleton—what was considered a skeleton in those days—Uncle James—our family's great man—but such a skeleton! People now would understand how wonderful it is—with its carved ivory bones—and golden joints and ruby eyes! *You little fool!*"

"Why, I'm proud!" I denied, backing back, all a-tremble. "I'll love those letters, Aunt Patricia."

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"You'd better!"

"I'll be sure to," I reiterated, but her face suddenly softened, and she caught up my hand in her yellow claw. She studied the palm for a moment.

"You'll understand them," she sighed. "Poor little, heart-strong Christie!"

And, whether her words were prophetic or delirious, she had told the truth. I have understood them.

She gave them over into my keeping that day; and the next morning we found her settled back among her pillows, imagining that all her brothers and sisters were flying above the mantelpiece and that the Chinese vase was in danger. Another day passed, and on Sunday afternoon all the wardrobe shelves yielded up their black bonnets.

I was not distressed, but I was lonely, with an ultra-Sabbathical repression over my spirits.

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"I believe I'll amuse myself by reading over those old letters," I suggested to mother, as time dragged wearily before the crowd began to gather. But she uttered a shriek, with an ultra-Sabbathical repression over its tone.

"Grace, you amaze me!" she said.

"She's really a most American child!" Cousin Pollie pronounced severely, having just finished doing the British Isles.

After this it seemed that years and years and years of the twentieth century passed—all in a heap. I awoke one morning to find myself set in my ways. Most women, in the formation of their happiness, are willing to let nature take its course, then there are others who are not content with this, but demand a postgraduate course. I, unfortunately, belonged to this latter class. Growing up I was fairly normal, not idle enough at school to forecast a brilliant career in any of the arts, nor studious enough to deserve a prediction of mediocre plodding the rest of my life; but after school came the deluge. I was restless, shabby and *single*—no one of which mother could endure in her daughter.

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So I was a disappointment to her, while the rest of the tribe gloated. The name, Grace, with all appurtenances and emoluments accruing thereto, availed nothing. I was a failure.

"My pet abomination begins with C," I chattered savagely to myself one afternoon in June, a suitable number of years after the above-mentioned christening, as I made my way to my own private desk in the office of *The Oldburgh Herald*, pondering family affairs in my heart as I went. "Of course this is at the bottom of the whole agony! They just can't bear to see me turn out to be a newspaper reporter instead of Mrs. Guilford Blake. And I hate everything that they love best—cities, clothes, clubs, culture, civilities, conventions, chiffons!"

I was thinking of Cousin Pollie's comment when she first saw a feature story in the *Herald* signed with my name.

"Is the girl named Grace or Disgrace?" she had asked. "Not since America was a wilderness has the name of any Christie woman appeared outside the head-lines of the society column!"

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"The whole connection has raised its eyebrows," I laughed, when I met the owner and publisher

of the paper down in his private office the next day. He was an old friend of the family, having fought beside my revered grandfather, and he had taken me into the family circle of the *Herald* more out of sympathy than need.

"That's all right! It's better to raise an eyebrow than to raise hell!" he laughed back.

But on the June afternoon I have in mind, when I hurried up-town thinking over my pet abominations beginning with C, I was still a fairly civilized being. I lived at home with mother in the old house, for one thing, instead of in an independent apartment, after the fashion of emancipated women—and I still wore Guilford Blake's heirloom scarab ring.

"Aren't your nerves a little on edge just now, Grace, from the scene this morning?" something kept whispering in my ears in an effort to tame my savagery. It was the soft virtuous personality of my inner consciousness, which, according to science, was Grandfather Moore. "You'll be all right, my dear, as soon as you make up your mind to do the square thing about this matter which is agitating you. And of course you are going to do the square thing. Money isn't all there is." 22

"Now, that's all rot, parson!" Uncle Lancelot, in the other hemisphere of my brain, denied stoutly. "Don't listen to him, Grace! You can't go on living this crocheted life, and money will bring freedom."

"He's a sophist, Grace," came convincingly across the wires.

"He's a purist, Grace," flashed back.

"Hush! Hush! What do two old Kilkenny cats of ancestors know about my problems?" I cried fiercely. Then, partly to drown out their clamor, I kept on: "My pet abominations in several syllables are—checkered career—contiguous choice—just because his mother and mine lived next door when they were girls—circumscribed capabilities—" 23

"And the desire of your heart begins with H," Uncle Lancelot said triumphantly. "You want Happy Humanness—different brand and harder to get than Human Happiness—you want a House that is a Home, and above all else you want a Husband with a sense of Humor!"

"But how could this letter affect all this?" I asked myself, stopping at the foot of the steps to take a message in rich vellum stationery from my bag. "How can so much be contained in one little envelope?"

After all, this was what it said:

"My dear Miss Christie:

"While in Oldburgh recently on a visit to Mr. Clarence Wiley"—he was the author of blood-and-thunder detective stories who lived on Waverley Pike and raised pansies between times—"I learned that you are in possession of the love-letters written by the famous Lady Frances Webb to your illustrious ancestor, James Mackenzie Christie. Mr. Wiley himself was my informer, and being a friend of your family was naturally able to give me much interesting information about the remaining evidences of this widely-discussed affair." 24

"No doubt the idea has occurred to you that the love-letters of a celebrated English novelist to the first American artist of his time would make valuable reading matter for the public; and the suggestion of these letters being done into a book has made such charming appeal to my mind that I resolved to put the matter before you without delay.

"To be perfectly plain and direct, this inheritance of yours can be made into a small fortune for you, since the material, properly handled, would make one of the best-selling books of the decade.

"If you are interested I shall be glad to hear from you, and we can then take up at once the business details of the transaction. Mr. Wiley spoke in such high praise of the literary value of the letters that my enthusiasm has been keenly aroused.

"With all good wishes, I am,

"Very sincerely yours,

"Julien J. Dutweiler."

There was an embossed superscription on the envelope's flap which read: "Coburn-Colt Company, Publishers, Philadelphia." They were America's best-known promoters—the kind who could take six inches of advertising and a red-and-gold binding and make a mountain out of a mole-hill. 25

"Small fortune!" I repeated. "Surely a great temptation *does* descend during a hungry spell—in real life, as well as in human documents." 26

CHAPTER II

A GLIMPSE OF PROMISED LAND

"Hello, Grace!"

I was passing the society editor in her den a moment later, and she called out a cheery greeting, although she didn't look up from her task. She was polishing her finger-nails as busily as if she lived for her hands—not by them.

"Hello, Jane!"

My very voice was out of alignment, however, as I spoke.

"Are you going to let all the world see that you're not a headstrong woman?" something inside my pride asked angrily, but as if for corroboration of my conscientious whisperings, I looked in a shamefaced way at the lines of my palm.—The head-line *was* weak and isolated—while the heart-line was as crisscrossed as a centipede track! 27

But a heart-line has nothing at all to do with a city editor's desk—certainly not on a day when the crumpled balls of copy paper lying about his waste-basket look as if a woman had thrown them! Every one had missed its mark, and up and down the length of the room the typewriters were clicking falsetto notes. The files of papers on the table were in as much confusion as patterns for heathen petticoats at a missionary meeting.

"What's up?"

I had made my way to the desk of the sporting editor, who writes poetry and pretends he's so aerial that he never knows what day of the week it is, but when you pin him down he can tell you exactly what you want to know—from the color of the bride's going-away gown to the amount the bridegroom borrowed on his life insurance policy.

"Search me!" he answered—as usual. 28

"But there's something going on in this office!" I insisted. "Everybody looks as exercised as if the baby'd just swallowed a moth-ball."

"Huh?"

He looked around—then opened his eyes wider. "Oh, I believe I did hear 'em say—"

"What?"

"That they can't get hold of that story about the Consolidated Traction Company."

"—And damn those foreigners who come over here with their fool notions of dignity!" broke in the voice of the city editor—then stopped and blushed when he saw me within ear-shot, for it's a rule of the office that no one shall say "damn" without blushing, except the society editor and her assistants.

"Who's the foreigner?" I asked, for the sake of warding off apologies. That's why men object so strongly to women mixing up with them in business life. It keeps them eternally apologizing.

"Maitland Tait," he replied. 29

"Maitland Tait? But that's not foreign. That's perfectly good English."

"So's he!" the city editor snapped. "It's his confounded John Bullishness that's causing all the trouble."

"But the traction company's no kin to us, is it?" the poet inquired crossly, for he was reporting a double-header in verse, and our chatter annoyed him.

"Trouble will be kin to us—if somebody doesn't break in on Great Britain and make him cough up the story," the city editor warned over his shoulder. "I've already sent Clemons and Bolton and Reade."

"—And it would mean a raise," the poet said, with a tender little smile. "A raise!"

"Are you sure?" I asked, after the superior officer had disappeared. "I'd like—a raise."

He looked at me contemptuously.

"You don't know what the Consolidated Traction Company is, I suppose?" he asked.

My business on the paper was reporting art meetings at the Carnegie Library and donation affairs at settlement homes because the owner and publisher drank out of the same canteen with my grandfather—and my fellows on the staff called me behind my back their ornamental member. 30

"I do!" I bristled. "It's located at a greasy place, called Loomis—and it's something that makes the wheels go round."

He smiled.

"It certainly does in Oldburgh," he said. "It's the biggest thing we have, next to our own cotton mills and to think that they're threatening to take their doll-rags and move to Birmingham and leave us desolate!"

"Where the iron would be nearer?" I asked, and he fairly beamed.

"*Sure!* Say, if you know that much about the company's affairs, why don't you try for this

assignment yourself?"

But I shook my head.

"I've got relatives in Alabama—that's how I knew that iron grows on trees down there," I explained.

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"Well—that's what the trouble is about! Oldburgh can't tell whether this fellow, Maitland Tait, is going to pack the 'whole blarsted thing, don't you know, into his portmanteau' and tote it off—or buy up more ground here and enlarge the plant so that the company's grandchildren will call this place home."

I turned away, feeling very indifferent. Oldburgh's problem was small compared with that letter in my hand-bag.

"And he won't tell?" I asked, crossing over to my own desk and fitting the key in a slipshod fashion.

"He seems to think that silence is the divine right of corporations. Nobody has been able to get a word out of him—nor even to see him."

"Then—they don't know whether he's a human being or a Cockney?"

He leaned across toward me, his elbow flattening two tiers of keys on his machine.

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"Say, the society's column's having fever and ague, too," he whispered. "The tale records that two of our 'acknowledged leaders' met him in Pittsburgh last winter—and they're at daggers' points now for the privilege of killing the fatted calf for him.—The one that does it first is IT, of course, and Jane Lassiter's scared to death! The calf is fat and the knife is sharp—but no report of the killing has come in."

I laughed. It always makes me laugh when I think how hard some people work to get rid of their fatted calves, and how much harder others have to labor to acquire a veal cutlet.

"Of course he was born in a cabin?" I turned back to the poet and asked, after a little while devoted to my own work, in which I learned that my mind wouldn't concentrate sufficiently for me to embroider my story of an embryo Michaelangelo the Carnegie Art Club had just discovered. "A cabin in the Cornish hills—don't you know?"

The sporting editor pulled himself viciously away from his typewriter.

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"Ty Cobb—Dry sob—By mob—"

"Oh, I beg your pardon!"

"Can't you see when a poem is about to die a-borning?" he asked furiously.

"I am sorry—and perhaps I might help you a little," I suggested with becoming meekness. "How's this?—High job—Nigh rob—"

I paused and he began writing hurriedly. Looking up again he threw me a smile.

"Bully! Grace Christie, you're the light o' my life," he announced, "and—and of course that blamed Englishman was born in a cabin, if that's what you want to know."

"It's not that I care, but—they always are," I explained. "They're born in a cabin, come across in the steerage amid terrific storms—Why is it that everybody's story of steerage crossing is stormy?—It seems to me it would be bad enough without that—then he sold papers for two years beneath the cart-wheels around the Battery, and by sheer strength of brain and brawn, has elevated himself into the proud privilege of being able to die in a 'carstle' when it suits his convenience."

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The sporting editor looked solicitous.

"And now, if I were you, to keep from wearing myself out with talking, I'd get on the car and ride out to Glendale Park," he advised.

But I shook my head.

"I can't."

"You really owe it to yourself," he insisted. "You are showing symptoms of a strange excitement to-day. You look as if you were talking to keep from doing something more annoying—if such a thing were possible."

"I'm not going to weep—either from excitement or the effects of your rudeness," I returned, then wheeling around and facing my desk again I let my dual personality take up its song.

"I can and I can't;
I will and I won't;
I'll be damned if I do—
I'll be damned if I don't!"

The story goes that a queen of Sweden composed this classic many years ago, but it's certainly

35

the national song of every one who has two people living in his skin that are not on speaking terms with each other.

Then, partly to keep from annoying the poet again, partly because it's the thing a woman always does, I took out the letter and read it over once more.

"Coburn-Colt—Philadelphia!"

The paper was a creamy satin, the embossing severely correct, the typing so neat and businesslike that I could scarcely believe the letter was meant for me when I looked at the outside only.

"Wonder what 'Julien J. Dutweiler' would call a small fortune?" I muttered. "Five thousand dollars? Ten thousand dollars!—Good heavens, then mother could have all the crepe meteor gowns she wanted without my ever—*ever* having to marry Guilford Blake for her sake!"

36

But as I sat there thinking, grandfather took up the cudgels bravely—even though the people most concerned were Christies and not Moores.

"Think well, Grace! That 'best-selling' clause means not only Maine to California, but England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Berwick-on-the-Tweed!" he warned. "Everybody who had ever heard of either of these two unfortunate people will buy a copy of the book and read it to find out what really happened!"

"But the letters are hers!" Uncle Lancelot reminded him. "If people don't want posterity to know the truth about them they ought to confine themselves to wireless communications."

"And—what would your Aunt Patricia say?" grandfather kept on. "What would James Christie say? What would Lady Frances Webb say?"

Thinking is certainly a bad habit—especially when your time belongs to somebody else and you are not being paid to think! Nevertheless, I sat there all the afternoon, puzzling my brain, when my brain was not supposed to wake up and rub its eyes at all inside the *Herald* office. I was being paid to come there and write airy little nothings for the *Herald's* airy little readers, yet I added to my sin of indecision by absorbing time which wasn't mine.

37

"Of course the possession of these letters in a way connects you with greatness," grandfather would say once in a while, in a lenient, musing sort of way. "But I trust that you are not going to let this fly to your head. Anyway, as the family has always known, your Uncle James Christie didn't leave his letters and papers to his great-niece; he merely *left* them! True, she was very close to him in his last days and he had always loved and trusted her—"

"But there's a difference between trusting a woman and trusting her *with your desk keys*!" Uncle Lancelot interrupted. "Uncle James ought to have known a thing or two about women by that time!"

"Yet we must realize that the value of the possession was considerable, even in those days," grandfather argued gently. "We must not blame his great-niece for what she did. James Mackenzie Christie had caught the whole fashionable world on the tip of his camel's-hair brush and pinioned it to canvases which were destined to get double-starred notices in guide-books for many a year to come, and the correspondence of kings and queens, lords and ladies made a mighty appeal to the young girl's mind."

38

"Then, that's a sure sign they'd be popular once again," said Uncle Lancelot. "Of course there's a degree of family pride to be considered, but that shouldn't make much difference. The Christies have always had pride to spare—now's the time to let some of it slide!"

Thus, after hours of time and miles of circling tentatively around the battlements of Colmere Abbey—the beautiful old place which had been the home of Lady Frances Webb—I was called back with a stern suddenness to my place in the *Herald* office.

39

"Can *you* think of anything else?" the poet's voice begged humbly. "I'm trying to match up just plain 'Ty' this time—but I'm dry."

I turned to him forgivingly. I welcomed any diversion.

"Rye, lie, die, sky,—why, what's the matter with your think tank?" I asked him. "They swarm!"

But before he could thank me, or apologize, the voice of the city editor was in the doorway. He himself followed his rasping tones, and as he came in he looked backward over his shoulder at a forlorn dejected face outside. He looked at his watch viciously, then snapped the case as if it were responsible for his spleen.

"Get to work then on something else," he growled. "There's no use spending car fare again to Loomis to-day that I can see! He's an Englishman—and of course he kisses a teacup at this time of the afternoon."

40

When I reached home late that afternoon I was in that state of spring-time restlessness which clamors for immediate activity—when the home-keeping instinct tries to make you believe that you'll be content if you spend a little money for garden seeds—but a reckless demon of extravagance notifies you that nothing short of salary sacrificed for railroad fare is going to avail.

Grandfather and Uncle Lancelot, of course, came in with their gratuitous advice, the one suggesting nasturtium beds with geraniums along the borders—the other slyly whispering that a boat trip from Savannah to Boston was no more than I deserved.

Then, reaching home in this frame of mind, I was confronted with two very perplexing and unusual conditions. *Mignon* was being played with great violence in the front parlor—and all over the house was the scent of burnt yarn. 41

"What's up?" I demanded of mother, as she met me at the door—dressed in blue. "Everything seems mysterious and topsyturvy to-day! I believe if I were to go out to the cemetery I'd find the tombstones nodding and whispering to one another."

"Come in here!" she begged in a Santa Claus voice.

I went into the parlor, then gave a little shriek.

"Mother!"

I have neglected to state, earlier in the narrative, that the one desire of my heart which doesn't begin with H was a player-piano! It was there in the parlor, at that moment, shining, and singing its wordless song about the citron-flower land.

"It's the very one we've been *watching* through the windows up-town," she said in a delighted whisper. 42

"But did you get it as a prize?" I inquired, walking into the dusky room and shaking hands with my betrothed, who rose from the instrument and made way for me to take possession. "How came it here?"

"I had it sent out—on—on approval," she elucidated. That is, her words took the form of an explanation, but her voice was as appealing as a Salvation Army dinner-bell, just before Christmas.

"On approval? But why, please?"

"Because I want you to get used to having the things you want, darling!"

Then, to keep from laughing—or crying—I ran toward the door.

"What *is* that burning?" I asked, sniffing suspiciously.

It was a vaguely familiar scent—scorching dress-goods—and suggestive of the awful feeling which comes to you when you've stood too close to the fire in your best coat-suit—or the comfortable sensation on a cold night, when you're preparing to wrap up your feet in a red-hot flannel petticoat. 43

"What is it? Tell the truth, mother!"

But she wouldn't.

"It's your brown tweed skirt, Grace," Guilford finally explained, as my eyes begged the secret of them both. They frequently had secrets from me.

"My brown tweed skirt?"

"It was as baggy at the knees as if you'd done nothing all winter but *pray* in it!" mother whimpered in a frightened voice. "I've—I've burned it up!"

For a moment I was silent.

"But what shall I tramp in?" I finally asked severely. "What can I walk out the Waverley Pike in?"

Then mother took fresh courage.

"You're not going to walk!" she answered triumphantly. "You're going to ride—in your very—own—electric—coupé! Here's the catalogue." 44

She scrambled about for a book on a table near at hand—and I began to see daylight.

"Oh, a player-piano, and an electric coupé—all in one day! I see! My fairy godmother—who was old Aunt Patricia, and she looked exactly like one—has turned the pumpkin into a gold coach! You two plotters have been putting your heads together to have me get rich quick and gracefully!"

"We understand that this stroke of fortune is going to make a great change in your life, Grace," Guilford said gravely. He was always grave—and old. The only way you could tell his demeanor from that of a septuagenarian was that he didn't drag his feet as he walked.

"Stroke of fortune?" I repeated.

"The Coburn—" mother began.

"Colt—" he re-enforced, then they both hesitated, and looked at me meaningly.

I gave a hysterical laugh.

"You and mother have counted your Coburn-Colts before they were hatched!" I exclaimed wickedly, sitting down and looking over the music rolls. I did want that player-piano tremendously—although I had about as much use for an electric coupé, under my present conditions in life, as I had for a perambulator.

45

"Grace, you're—indelicate!" mother said, her voice trembling. "Guilford's a man!"

"A man's a man—especially a Kentuckian!" I answered. "You're not shocked at my mention of colts and—and things, are you, Guilford?"

My betrothed sat down and lifted from the bridge of his nose that badge of civilization—a pair of rimless glasses. He polished them with a dazzling handkerchief, then replaced the handkerchief into the pocket of the most faultless coat ever seen. He smoothed his already well-disciplined hair, and brushed away a speck of dust from the toe of his shoe. From head to foot he fairly bristled with signs of civic improvement.

"I am shocked at your reception of your mother's kind thoughtfulness," he said.

He waited a little while before saying it, for hesitation was his way of showing disapproval. Yet you must not get the impression from this that Guilford was a bad sort! Why, no woman could ride in an elevator with him for half a minute without realizing that he was the flower-of-chivalry sort of man! He always had a little way of standing back from a woman, as if she were too sacred to be approached, and in her presence he had a habit of holding his hat clasped firmly against the buttons of his coat. You can forgive a good deal in a man if he keeps his hat off all the time he's talking to you!

46

"Shocked?" I repeated.

"Your mother always plans for your happiness, Grace."

"Of course! Don't you suppose I know that?" I immediately asked in an injured tone. It is always safe to assume an injured air when you're arguing with a man, for it gives him quite as much pleasure to comfort you as it does to hurt you.

47

"I didn't—mean anything!" he hastened to assure me.

"Guilford merely jumped at the chance of your freeing yourself of this newspaper slavery," mother interceded. "You know what a humiliation it is to him—just as it is to me and to every member of the—Christie family."

My betrothed nodded so violently in acquiescence that his glasses flew off in space.

"You know that I am a Kentuckian in my way of regarding women, Grace," he plead. "I can't bear to see them step down from the pedestal that nature ordained for them!"

I turned and looked him over—from the crown of his intensely aristocratic fair head to the tip of his aristocratic slim foot.

"A Kentuckian?"

"Certainly!"

"A Kentuckian?" I repeated reminiscently. "Why, Guilford Blake, you ought to be olive-skinned—and black-eyed—and your shoes ought to turn up at the toes—and your head ought to be covered by a red fez—and you ought to sit smoking through a water-bottle of an evening, in front of your—your—"

48

"Grace!" stormed mother, rising suddenly to her feet. "I will not have you say such things!"

"What things?" I asked, drawing back in hurt surprise.

"H-harems!" she uttered in a blushing whisper, but Guilford caught the word and squared his shoulders importantly.

"But, I say, Grace," he interrupted, his face showing that mixture of anger and pleased vanity which a man always shows when you tell him that he's a dangerous tyrant, or a bold Don Juan—or both. "You don't think I'm a Turk—do you?"

"I do."

He sighed wistfully.

"If I were," he said, shaking his head, "I'd have caught you—and *veiled* you—long before this."

49

I looked at him intently.

"You mean—"

"That I shouldn't have let you delay our marriage this way! Why should you, pray, when my financial affairs have changed so in the last year?"

I rose from my place beside the new piano, breaking gently into his plea.

"It isn't that!" I attempted to explain, but my voice failed drearily. "You ought to know that—finances hadn't anything to do with it. I haven't kept from marrying you all these years because we were both so poor—then, last year when you inherited your money—I didn't keep from marrying you because you were so rich!"

"Then, what is it?" he asked gravely, and mother looked on as eagerly for my answer as he did. This is one advantage about a life-long betrothal. It gets to be a family institution. Or is that a disadvantage?

"I—don't know," I confessed, settling back weakly.

50

"I don't think you do!" mother observed with considerable dryness.

"Well, this business of your getting to be a famous compiler of literature may help you get your bearings," Guilford kept on, after an awkward little pause. "You have always said that you wished to exercise your own wings a little before we married, and I have given in to you—although I don't know that it's right to humor a woman in these days and times. Really, I don't know that it is."

"Oh, you don't?"

"No—I don't. But we're not discussing that now, Grace! What I'm trying to get at is that this offer means a good deal to you. Of course, it is only the beginning of your career—for these fellows will think up other things for you to do—and it will give you a way of earning money that won't take you up a flight of dirty office stairs every day. Understand, I mean for just a short while—as long as you insist upon earning your own living."

51

"And the honor!" mother added. "You could have your pictures in good magazines!"

I stifled a yawn, for, to tell the truth, the conflict had made me nervous and weary.

"At all events, I must decide!" I exclaimed, starting again to my feet. "Somehow, the office atmosphere isn't exactly conducive to deep thought—and I've had so little time since morning to get away by myself and thresh matters out."

Mother looked at me incredulously.

"Will you please tell me just what you mean, Grace?" she asked.

"I mean that I must get away—I've imagined that I ought to take some serious thought, weigh the matter well, so to speak—before I write to the Coburn-Colt Publishing Company. In other words, I have to decide."

"Decide?" mother repeated, her face filled with piteous amazement. "*Decide?*"

"Decide?" Guilford said, taking up the strain complainingly.

52

"If you'll excuse me!" I answered, starting toward the door, then turning with an effort at nonchalance, for their sakes, to wave them a little adieu. "Suppose you keep on playing 'Knowest thou the land where the citron-flower blooms,' Guilford—for I am filled with *wanderlust* right now, and this music will help out Uncle Lancelot's presentation of the matter considerably!"

"What?"

"I'm going to listen to the voices," I explained. "All day long grandfather and Uncle Lancelot have been busy making the fur fly in my conscience!"

Mother darted across the room and caught my hand.

"You don't mean to say that you have scruples—*scruples*—Grace Christie?"

She couldn't have hated smallpox worse—in me.

"Honest Injun, I don't know!" I admitted. "Of course, it does seem absurd to ponder over what a family row might be raised in the Seventh Circle of Nirvana by the publication of these old love-letters, but—"

53

"James Mackenzie Christie died in 1849," she declared vehemently. "Absurd! It is *insane!*"

"That's what the Uncle Lancelot part of my intelligence keeps telling me," I laughed. "But—good heavens! you just ought to hear the grandfather argument."

"What does he—what does that silly *Salem* conscience of yours say against the publication of the letters?" she asked grudgingly.

I sat down again.

"Shall I tell you?" I began good-naturedly, for I saw that mother was at the melting point—melting into tears, however, not assent. "Whenever I want to do anything I'm not exactly *sure* of, these two provoking old gentlemen come into the room—the council-chamber of my heart—and

begin their post-mortem warfare. Grandfather is white-bearded and serene, while Uncle Lancelot looks exactly as an Italian tenor *ought* to look—and never does."

54

"And you look exactly like him," mother snapped viciously. "Nothing about you resembles your grandfather except your brow and eyes."

"I know that," I answered resignedly. "Hasn't some one said that the upper part of my face is as lofty as a Byronic thought—and the lower as devilish as a Byronic *deed*?"

Neither of them smiled, but Guilford stirred a little.

"Go on with your argument, Grace," he urged patiently. He was always patient.

"I'm going!" I answered. "All day grandfather has been telling me what I already know—that the Coburn-Colt Company doesn't want those letters of James Christie's because they are literary, or beautiful, or historical, but simply and solely because they are *bad*! They'll make a good-seller because they're the thing the public demands right now. Lady Frances Webb was a *married* woman!"

"Nonsense," mother interrupted, with a blush. "The public doesn't demand bad things! There is merely a craze for intimate, biographical matter—told in the first person."

55

"I know," I admitted humbly. "This is what distinguishes a human from an inhuman document."

"The craze demands a simple straightforward narrative—" Guilford began, then hesitated.

"In literature this is the period of the great '*I Am*,'" I broke in. "People want the secrets of a writer's soul, rather than the tricks of his vocabulary, I know."

"Well, good lord—you wouldn't be giving the twentieth century any more of these people's souls than they themselves gave to the early nineteenth," he argued scornfully. "She put his portrait into every book she ever wrote—and he annexed her face in the figure of every saint—and sinner—he painted!"

"Well, that was because they couldn't *see* any other faces," I defended.

"Bosh!"

"But Lady Frances Webb was a good woman," mother insisted weakly. "She had pre-Victorian ideas! She sent her lover across seas, because she felt that she must! Why, the publication of these letters would do *good*, not harm."

56

"They would shame the present-day idea of 'affinity' right," said Guilford.

I nodded my head, for this was the same theory that Uncle Lancelot had been whispering in my ears since the postman blew his whistle that morning. And yet—

"Maybe you two—don't exactly understand the import of those letters as I do," I suggested, sorry and ashamed before the gaze of their practical eyes. "But to me they mean so much! I have always *loved* James Christie and—his Unattainable. I can feel for them, and—"

"And you mean to say that you are going to give way to an absurd fancy now—a ridiculous, far-fetched, namby-pamby, quixotic fancy?" mother asked, in a tone of horror.

"I—I'm—afraid so!" I stammered.

"And miss this chance—for all the things you want most? The very things you're toiling day and night to get?"

57

"And put off the prospect of our marriage?" Guilford demanded. "I had hoped that this business transaction would satisfy the unaccountable desire you seem to have for independence—that after you had circled about a little in the realm of emancipated women and their strained notions of what constitutes freedom, you'd see the absurdity of it all and—come to me."

"I am awfully sorry, Guilford," I answered, dropping my eyes, for I knew that "freedom," "independence" and "emancipation" had nothing on earth to do with my delayed marriage—and I knew that I was doing wrong not to say so. "I am *awfully* sorry to disappoint you."

"Then you have decided finally?" mother asked in a suspicious voice.

"I believe I have," I answered. "Oh, please don't look at me that way—and please don't cry! I can't help it!"

"It is preposterous," Guilford said shortly.

58

"But you don't—understand!" I cried, turning to him pleadingly. "You don't know what it is to feel as I feel about those lovers—those people who had no happiness in this world—and are haunted and tormented by curiosity in their very graves!—don't you suppose I want to do the thing you and mother want me to do? Of course, I do! I want this—this new piano—and another brown tweed skirt that doesn't bag at the knees—and I want—so many things!"

"Then why in the name of——" he began.

"Because I *won't*!" I told him flatly. "Call it conscience—fancy, or what you will!—I have those two people in my power—their secrets are right here in my hands! And I'm not going to *give them*

away!"

"Grace, you a-maze me!" mother sobbed.

But Guilford rose tranquilly and reached for his hat.

"Any woman who has a conscience like that ought to cauterize it—with a curling-iron—and get rid of it," he observed dryly.

59

CHAPTER IV

THE QUALITY OF MERCY

That night I went to my bedroom and pulled open the top of an old-fashioned desk standing in the corner. Except for this desk there was not another unnecessary piece of furniture in the apartment, for I like a cell-like place to sleep. I consider that fresh air and a clear conscience ought to be the chief adjuncts—for a cluttered-up, luxurious bedroom always reminds me of Camille—and tuberculosis.

"And all this fuss about a few little faded wisps of paper!"

I sat down before the desk, after I had loosed my hair—which is that very, very black, that is the Hibernian accompaniment to blue eyes—and had slipped my slippers on.

60

"You have put me to considerable trouble to-day, Lady Frances."

Her portrait was hanging there—a small, cabinet-sized picture, in a battered gold frame. Her lover had succeeded in making her face on canvas very beautiful—with the exaggerated beauty of eyes and mouth which all portraits of that period show. Her brow was fine and thoughtful, irradiating the face with intelligence, yet I never looked at her without having a feeling that I was infinitely wiser than she.

Isn't it queer that we have this feeling of superiority over the people in old portraits—just because they are dead and we are living? We open an ancient book of engravings, and say: "Poor little Mary Shelley! Simple little Jane Austen! Naughty little Nell Gwynne!"—There's only one pictured lady of my acquaintance who smiles down my latter-day wisdom as being a futile upstart thing. I can't pity her! Oh, no! Nor endure her either, for she's Mona Lisa!

61

I had always had this maternal protectiveness in my attitude toward Lady Frances Webb, and to-night it was so keen that I could have tucked her in bed and told her fairy tales to soothe away the trembling fright she must have endured all that day. Instead of doing this, however, I satisfied myself with reading some of the letters over again. Isn't it a pity that above every writing-desk devoted to inter-sex correspondence there is not a framed warning: "Beyond Platonic Friendship Lies—Alimony!"

Anyway, Lady Frances and James Christie tried the medium ground for a while. Over in a large pigeonhole, far away from the rest, was a packet of letters tied with a strong twine. They were the uninteresting ones, because they were *muzzled*. The handwriting was the same as that of the others—dainty, last-century chirography, as delicate and curling as a baby's pink fingers—but I never read them, for I don't care for muzzled things. Gossip about Lady Jersey—Marlborough House—the cold-blooded ire of William Lamb—all this held but little charm—compared with the other.

62

"Not you—not to-night," I decided, pushing them aside quickly. "I've got to have good pay for my pains of this day!"

I sought another compartment, where a batch huddled together—a carefully selected batch. They were as many, and as clinging in their contact with one another, as early kisses. I took up the first one.

"Dear Big Man"—it began.

"It has been weeks and weeks now since I have seen you! If it were not that you lived in that terrible London and I in this lonely country, I should be too proud to remind you of the time, for I should expect you to be the one to complain.

"Surely it is because of this that I now hate London so! It keeps this knowledge of separation—this sense of dreary waiting—from burning into your heart, as it does into mine!

63

"There you are kept too busy to think—but here I can do nothing else!—Or perhaps I am quite wrong, and it is not a matter of London and Lancashire, after all, but the more primal one of your being a man, and my being a woman! *Do* I love the more? I wonder? And yet, I don't think that I care much! I am willing to love more abjectly than any woman ever loved before—if you care for me just a little in return."

(I always felt *very* wise and maternal at this point.)

"You were an awful goose, Lady Frances!" I said. "This is a mistake that *I* have never made!"

"Still, I am tormented by thoughts of you in London," the letter kept on. "I think of you—there—as a lion. It presses down upon me, this recollection that you are James Christie, the great artist, and the only release from the torture is when I go alone into the library and sit down before the fire. The two chairs are there—those two that were there that day—and then I can forget about the lion. 'Jim—Jim!' I whisper—'just my *lover!*'"

64

"Then your face comes—it has to come, or I could never be good! Your rugged face that speaks of great forests which have been your home—the fierce young freedom which has nurtured you—and the glorious uplift you have achieved above all that is small and weak!"

"You have asked me a thousand times why I love you, but I have never known what to say—because I love you for so many things—until now, when I have nothing but memories—and the ever-present sight of your absent face. And now I don't know why I love you, but I know what I love best about you. Shall I tell you—though of course you know already! It is not your talent—wonderful as it is—for there have been other artists; nor your terrible charm with its power to lure women away from duty—for England is full of fascinating men; nor your sweetness—and I think the first time I saw you smile I sounded the depths of this—it is not any of these, dear heart! Not any of these! I love best the strength of you which you use to control the charm—the untamed force of your personality which makes your talent seem just an incident—and the big, *big* virility of you!"

65

"Do you think for a moment that you look like an artist? Half-civilized you? Why, you are a woodsman, dear love—but not a hunter! You could never kill living things for the joy of seeing them die!"

"You look as if you had spent all your life in the woods, doing hard tasks patiently—a woodcutter, or a charcoal burner! Ah, a charcoal burner! A man who has had to grip life with bared hands and wrest his bread from grudging circumstances. This is what you are, Jim, to my heart's eyes. You are a primal creature—simple-souled, great-bodied, and your mind is given over to naked truth."

"But all the time you are a famous artist—and London's idol! Your studio in St. James's Street is the lounging-place for curled darlings! The hardest task that your hands perform is over the ugly features of a fat duchess!—How can you, Jim? Why don't you come away? You are a man first, an artist afterward—and it is the man that I love!"

66

"And, Jim, *do* you know how much I love you? Do you know how your face leads me on?—It is your face I must have now, darling. *Portrait of the Artist, by Himself*, is a title I have often smiled over, wondering how a man could be induced to paint his own features, but now I know! It is always because some woman has so clamorously demanded it—a woman who loved him! What else can so entirely satisfy—and when will you send it to me?"

When I came to the end I was sorry, for I had such a way of getting en rapport with her sentiments that I eyed the next express wagon I passed, eagerly, to see if it could possibly be bringing the *Portrait of the Artist, by Himself!*

And on this occasion I reread a portion of the letter.

67

"Your face—your rugged face—or I could never be good!"

The picture of a rugged face was haunting me, and after a moment a sudden thought came to me.

"Why, that's what *I* should like!"

I had the grace to feel ashamed, of course, especially as I recalled how mother and Guilford had tormented me that afternoon to know why I wouldn't marry—and I found the answer in this sudden discovery. Still, that didn't keep me from pursuing the subject.

"A rugged face—great forests—fierce freedom—glorious uplift!—Oh, Man! Man! Where are you—and where is your great forest?—That's exactly what I want!"

I turned back to the desk, after a while, and still allowing my mind to circle away from the business at hand somewhat, I drew out another letter. It was short—and troubled. The dear, little, lady-like writing ran off at a tangent.

"Yes, I have seen the picture! Next to Murillo's *Betrothal of St. Catherine*,—the face is the loveliest thing I have ever seen on canvas."

68

"Of course it is idealized—yet so absurdly *like* that they tell me all Mayfair is staring! This talk—this stirring-up of what has been sleeping—will make it a thousand times harder for us ever to see each other, yet I am glad you did it!"

"They are saying—Mayfair—that your 'making a pageant of a bleeding heart' is as indelicate as Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon!* If people are going to be in love wickedly at least they ought not to write books about it—nor paint pictures of it!... Oh, beloved, let us pray that we may always keep bitterness out of our portraits of each other!"

The letter burned my fingers, for the pen marks were quick and jagged—like electric sparks—and I felt the pain that had sent them out; so I turned back to others of the batch—others that I knew almost by heart, yet always found something new in.

"I don't know that it's such an enviable state, after all, this being in love," I mused. "It seems to me it consists of—quite a mixture! But, of course, it will take Heaven itself to solve the problem of a thornless rose!"

69

I ran my finger over the edges of the improvised envelopes, heavily sealed and bearing complicated foreign stamping. There were dozens of them—many only the common garden variety of love-letters, long-drawn out, confidential, reminiscent or hopeful, as the case might be—and a few which sounded at times almost light-hearted.

"When I say that I think of you all the time I am not so original as my critics give me credit for being, dear heart," she wrote in one. "Nothing else in the annals of love-making is so trite as this, but when I explain how persistently your image is before me, how intricately woven with every thought of the future—how inseparably linked with every vision of happiness—you will know that mine is no light nor passing attachment.

70

"If I give you one foolish example of this will it bore you? I've written you before, I believe, that this spring I have been outdoors all the time—riding or driving about the country, because the mad restlessness of thinking about you drives me out. In this house, in these gardens, *you* are so constantly present that I can do nothing but remember—then I go away, hoping to forget—and what happens?—I go into a castle—a place where you have never been, perhaps—and before I can begin talking with any one, or think of any sensible thing to say the thought comes to me: 'How well the figure of my lover would fit in with all this grandeur! How naturally and easily he would swing through these great rooms!'

"Then, early some mornings I ride into the village—past cottages that look so humble and happy that I feel my heart stifling with longing to possess one of them—and *you*! 'How happy I could be living there,' I think, 'but—how tremendously tall and stalwart Jim would look coming in through this low doorway, as I called him to supper!'

71

"Then I spend hours and hours planning the real home I want us to have, dear love of mine. I don't care much whether it is a castle or a cottage, just so it has you in it—and all around it must be the sight of distant hills! These for *your* artist's soul!

"You and a hundred distant hills, Jim! Then days—and nights, and nights and days—and summers and winters of joy!

"Some time this will come to pass—it must—and we shall call it heaven! And we shall rejoice that we were strong to keep the faith through the days of trial and longing so that we could reach it and be worthy of it.

"And, when this shall come, I can never know fear again—fear that London will make you cease to love me—that some other woman may gain possession of you—that the artist in you may crush out and starve the lover. There will be but one thought of fear then, and that will be that you may die and leave me, but this will not be hopeless, for I too can die!

72

"Oh, do you remember that first day—that wonderful, anguished, bewildering first day—then that night when I kissed you? When I think of sickening fear I always remember that time. Two weeks before the London newspapers had chronicled your visit to Colmere Abbey 'to paint the portrait of the novelist, Lady Frances Webb,' but you were deceiving the newspapers, for you had lost your power to paint!

"It was quite early in the morning of that eighth or ninth day of blessed dalliance, when the canvas still showed itself accusingly bare, that you threw down your brush and declared you were going back to London, 'because—because Colmere Abbey had robbed your hands of their power.'

"And what did I do when you told me this terrible thing? I said, wickedly and without shame, 'Would you go away and leave me all alone in idleness?'

73

"'Idleness?' you repeated, pretending not to understand.

"'Neither can I do any work—since you came to Colmere!'

"You stood quite still beside the easel for a breathless moment, then:

"'Do *I*—keep *you*—from working?' you asked.

"Your face tried to look sorry and amazed, but the triumph showed through and glorified your dear eyes.

"'Then certainly I must go away—at once—to-day,' you kept on, but you came straight across the room and placed your hands upon my shoulders. 'Just this once—just one time, sweetheart, then I'll go straight away and never see you again!'

"And that night, true to your promise, you did go away, but I followed you to the gates—and when I saw horses ready saddled there to take you away from me, the high resolves I had made came fluttering to earth. I put my hands up to your face and kissed you. During all the giddy joy of that day's confessional I had kept from doing this, but—not when I saw you leaving!

74

"'I wish that this kiss could mark your cheek—and let all the world know that you are mine,' I whispered, shivering against you in that first madness of fear over losing you.

"'You've made a mark!' you laughed fondly. 'A mark that I shall carry all the days of my life.'

"But I was still fearful.

"You may know that you are marked, but how will the world—how will other women know that you are mine?"

"The world shall know it," you declared, brushing back my hair and kissing me again. "There will never be another woman in my life—and some day, when I can paint your portrait, it will certainly know then. To me you are so very beautiful."

75

Another letter was just a note, addressed to London, and evidently written in great haste to catch a delayed post-bag.

"Oh, my dear, that orange tree of ours—that you and I planted together that day—is putting out tiny blossoms! Do you suppose it is a happy omen, Jim? How I have worked with it through this dreary winter—and now to think that it is blooming!

"Your dear hands have touched it! It is a living thing which can receive my caresses and repay their tenderness by growing tall and strong and beautiful—like you. Do you wonder that I love it?"

"When you come again I shall take you out to see it, and we shall walk softly up to the shelf where it stands—so carefully, to keep from jarring a single leaf—and we shall separate the branches, still very carefully, to look down at the little new stems. And, Jim—Jim—the blossoms will be like starry young eyes looking up at us! The pink, faintly-showing glow will be as delicate as a tiny cheek, when sleep has flushed it—and the petals will close over our fingers with all the clinging softness of a helpless little clutch!"

76

"We will be very happy for a little while, but, because I am savage and resentful over our delayed joy, I shall cry on your shoulder and say it's cruel—*cruel*—that you and I have only this plant to love together."

After this came two or three more, like it, then I reached for one which brought a misty wetness to my eyes. The lover was gone—quite gone—and the woman had seemed to feel that they would meet no more.

... "At other times I remember all the months which have gone by since then—and the miles of dark water which roll between your land and mine. God pity the woman who has a lover across the sea!

"Am I sorry that I sent you away? You ask me this—yet how can you! How many letters I have written, bidding you, nay *begging* you to come back—how many times have I dropped them into the post-bag in the hall—then, after an hour's thought, have run in terror and snatched them out again!"

77

"I am trying so hard to be good! Can I hold out—just a little while longer? I am going to die young, remember, and that is the one hope which consoles me! It used to be that I shrank from the medical men who told me this—who told me with their pitying eyes and grave looks—but now I welcome their gravity. Sir Humphrey Davy has written a letter to my husband, advising him to send me off to Italy for this incoming winter—but I shall not go! 'I fear that dread phthisis in the rigor of English cold,' he writes—but for me it can not come too soon!"

"... Yet all the time the knowledge haunts me that our lives are passing! I can not bear it! I spend the hours out in the garden—where the sun-dial tells me—all *silently*—of the day's wearing on.

"Since you went away I can not listen to the sound of the clock in the hall. That chime—that holy trustful chime—'O Lord, our God, be Thou our Guide,' shames the unholy prayer on my lips.

78

"Then the clock ticks, ticks, ticks—all day—all night—on, and on, and on—to remind me of our hearts' wearying beats! Does this thought ever come to madden you? That our hearts have only so many times to throb in this life—and when we are apart every pulsation is wasted?"

I thrust this letter back into its place—then hastily closed down the desk. The sensation of reading a thing like that is not pleasant. She had written with an awful, *awful* pain in her heart—and she had lived before the days of anesthetics!

"Women don't feel things like that—now," I muttered, as I crossed the room and lowered the curtain. "They—they have too many other things to divert them, I suppose!"

I knew, however, that I was judging everybody by myself, and certainly *I* had never known an awful hurt like that.

79

"Why, I could listen to a *taximeter* tick—for a whole year—while Guilford was away from me, and I don't believe it would make me nervous for a sight of him."

I was considerably disgusted with myself for my callousness as I came to this conclusion, however, and I sat down in the window, overlooking the tiny strip of rose-garden to think it out. Presently I crossed the room again to the desk.

"*I'm* not going to jest at scars—even if I haven't felt a wound!" I decided, once and for always.

I opened the desk then and gathered up the letters, packet by packet, tying them into one big bundle.

"Publish these—heart-throbs!"

I was so furious that I could have gagged Uncle Lancelot if he had opened his mouth—which he didn't dare do! In this respect he and grandfather are very much like living relatives. They'll argue with you through ninety-nine years of indecision, but once you've made up your mind irrevocably they close their lips into a sullen silence—saving their breath for "I told you so!"

80

"I don't see how anybody could have thought of such blasphemy!" I kept on. "It would be like a vivisection! That's what people want though, nowadays—they won't have just a book! They want to be present at a clinic!—They want to see others' hearts writhe—because they have no feelings of their own!"

Then, after my thoughts had had time to get away from the past up into the present and project themselves, somewhat spitefully, into the future, I made another decision, slamming the desk lid to accentuate it.

"I shall not publish them myself—nor ever give anybody else a chance to publish them!" I declared. "By rights they are not really mine! I am just their guardian, because Aunt Patricia couldn't take them on her journey with her—and some day I shall take them on a journey with me. To Colmere Abbey—that dream-house of mine! That's the thing to do! And burn them on the hearth in the library, where she likely burned his—if she did burn them! Of course I can't run the risk of what the next generation might do!"

81

This last thought tormented me as I fell asleep.

"No, I can not hand those letters down to my daughters," I decided drowsily, being in that hazy state where the mind traverses unheard-of fields—unheard-of for waking thought—and queer little twisting decisions come. "They would *never* be able to understand!"

I was aroused by this hypothesis into sudden wakefulness.

"Of course they could not understand—me or my feelings!" I muttered, sitting up in bed and facing the darkness defiantly. "They *could* not—if—if they were Guilford's daughters, too!"

82

CHAPTER V

ET TU, BRUTE!

My first waking thought the next morning had nothing on earth to do with the dilemma of the day before. I stretched my arms lazily, then a little shrinkingly, as I remembered what the daily grind would be. There was to be a Flag Day celebration of the Daughters of the American Revolution—and I was to report Major Coleman's speech. That's why I shrank. I am not a society woman.

"D. A. R.," I grumbled, jumping out of bed and going across to the window to see what kind of day we were going to have.—"*D-a-r-n!*"

Anyway, the day was all right, and after waving a welcome to the sun—whose devout worshiper I am—I rubbed a circle of dust off the mirror and looked at myself. Every woman has distinctly pretty days—and distinctly homely ones; and usually the homely ones come to the front viciously when you're booked for something extraordinary. However, this proved to be one of my good-looking periods, and out of sheer gratitude I polished off the whole expanse of the mirror. Incidentally, I am not an absolutely dustless housekeeper, in spite of my craze for simplicity. I consider that there are only two things that need be kept passionately clean in this life—the human skin and the refrigerator.

83

"Are you going to dress for the fête—before you go to the office?" mother inquired rebelliously, as she saw me arranging my hair with that look of masculine expectation later on in the morning. "Why don't you get your other work off, then come back home and dress?"

"Well—because," I answered indifferently.

"But the *Sons* of the Revolution are going to meet with the Daughters!" she warned.

"I know that."

84

As if to demonstrate my possession of this knowledge I turned away from the mirror and displayed my festive charms. A light gray coat-suit had been converted into the deception of a gala garment by the addition of Irish lace; and mother, looking it over contemptuously, went into her own bedroom for a moment, and came back carrying her diamond-studded D. A. R. pin. She held it out toward me—with the air of a martyr.

"But—aren't you going to wear it yourself?" I asked, with a little feeling of awe at the lengths of mother-love. She had been regent of her chapter—and loved the organization well enough to go to Washington every year.

"No."

"Then—then do you mean to say that you're not going to Mrs. Walker's to-day?"

She shook her head.

"Why—mother!"

I turned to her and saw that a tear had dropped down upon the last golden bar bridging the wisp of red, white and blue. There were ten bars in all, each one engraved for an ancestor—and when I wore the thing I felt like a foreign diplomat sitting for his picture. 85

"What's the matter, honey?" I asked. She had always been my little girl, and I felt at times as if I were unduly severe in my discipline of her.

"Grace, you don't know how I feel!"

The words came jerkily—and I knew that I was in for it.

"Does your head ache?" I asked hastily. "You'd better get on the car and ride out into the—"

"My head *doesn't* ache!" she denied stoutly. "It's my h-heart!—To see you—Grace Chalmers Christie—racing around to such things as this in a coat-suit! You ought, by right of birth and charm, be the chief ornament of such affairs as this—the chief ornament, I say—yet you go carrying a *'hunk o' copy paper!'*"

"In my bag," I modified. 86

"And you get up and leave places before you get a bite of food—and race back to that office, like a wild thing, to *'turn it in!'*"

This contemptuous use of my own jargon caused me to laugh.

"And do you think that the wearing of this heavy pin will prove so exhausting that I'll have to stay at Mrs. Walker's to-day for a bite of food?" I asked.

She looked at me in helpless reproach.

"I want you to go to this thing as a D. A. R.," she explained, "not as a *Herald* reporter."

"Then I'll wear it," I promised, kissing her soothingly. "But you must go, too."

She shook her head again.

"I can't—I really can't!" she said. "I've got nothing fine enough to wear. This is going to be a magnificent thing, every one tells me—with all the local Sons—and this wonderful Major Coleman to lecture on flags."

She looked at me suspiciously as she uttered her plaint about the Sons being present, and in answer, I thrust forward one gray suede pump. 87

"But I'm ready for any Son on earth—Oldburgh earth," I protested. "Don't you *see* my exquisite lace collar—and the pink satin rose in my chapeau—and this silken and buskskin footgear? Surely no true Son would ever pause to suspect the *'hunk o' copy paper'* which lieth beneath all this glory!"

"Isn't Guilford going with you?" she called after me as I left the house a few minutes later. "Will he meet you at the office?"

"No—thank heaven—it's an awful thing to have to listen to two men talk at the same time—especially when you're taking one down in shorthand—and Guilford is mercifully busy this afternoon."

I had a bunch of pink roses, gathered fresh that morning from our strip of garden, and I stopped in the office of the owner and publisher when I had reached the *Herald* building. Just because he's old, and drank out of the same canteen with my grandfather I made a habit of keeping fresh flowers in his gray Rookwood vase. This spot of color, together with the occasional twinkle from his eyes, made the only break in the dusty newspaperly monotony of the room. He looked up from his desk, and his face brightened as he saw my holiday attire. 88

"Well, Grace?"

He started up, big and shaggy—and wistful—like a St. Bernard. I like old men to look like St. Bernards—and young ones to look like greyhounds.

"Don't get up—nor clear off a chair for me," I warned, catching up the vase and starting toward the water-cooler. "I can't stay a minute."

He collapsed into his squeaky revolving chair. When he was a lad a Yankee minnie ball had implanted a kiss upon his left shoulder-blade, and he still carried that side with a jaunty little hike—a most flirtatious little hike, which, however, caused the distinguished rest of him to appear unduly severe. 89

"Ah! But you must explain the *'dolloed-up'* aspect," he begged.

I laughed at the schoolgirl slang.

"Why, this is Flag Day!" I told him. "How can you have forgotten?—There will be a gigantic celebration at Mrs. Hiram Walker's—and all the pedigreed world will be there."

He smiled—slowly.

"And you're writing it up?"

"Just Major Coleman's lecture! They say he is quite the most learned man in the world on the subject of flags. He knows them and loves them. He carries them about with him on these lecture tours in felt-lined steel cases."

"Cases?" he smiled.

"Certainly," I answered. "Whatever a man esteems most precious—or useful—he has cases for! The commercial man has his sample cases—the medical man his instrument cases—the artistic man, his—"

"Divorce cases," he interrupted dryly.

90

"Alas, yes!" I sighed, my thoughts traveling back.

He wheeled slowly, giving me a glance which finally tapered off with the pink rosebuds in my hands.

"Then," he asked kindly, "if you're going to a very great affair this afternoon, why don't you keep these flowers and wear them yourself?"

I shook my head.

"But I'm a newspaper woman!" I said with dignity. "I might as well wear a vanity-bag as to wear flowers."

"Bosh! You're not a newspaper woman, Grace," he denied, still looking at me half sadly. "And yet—well, sometimes it is—just such women as you who do the amazing things."

"Mother thinks so, certainly!" I laughed. "But you meant in what way, for instance?"

He hesitated, studying me for a moment, while I held still and let him, for there's always a satisfaction in being studied when there's a satin rose in your hat.

91

"Oh—nothing," he finally answered, with a look of regret upon his face.

"But it is something!" I persisted, "and, even if I am in a big hurry, I shan't budge until you tell me!"

"Well, since you insist—I only meant to say that I'd been doing a little thinking on my own account lately—as owner and publisher of this paper, with its interests at heart—and I've wondered just how much a woman might accomplish, after a man had failed."

"A woman?"

"By the ill use of her eyes, I mean," he confessed, his own eyes twinkling a little. "Women can gain by the ill use of their eyes what men fail to accomplish by their straightforward methods."

"But that's what men hate so in women!" I said.

He nodded.

"Ye-es—maybe! That is, they make a great pretense of hating a woman when she uses her eyes to any end save one—charming them for their own dear sakes!"

92

"They naturally grudge her the spoils she gains by the ill use of those important members," I answered defensively.

"Oh," he put in quickly, "I wasn't going to suggest that you do any such thing—unless you wanted to! I was merely thinking—that was all!"

"And besides," I kept on, "all the men who have ever done anything worth being interviewed for—nearly all of them, I mean—are so old that—"

He interrupted me wrathfully.

"Old men are not necessarily blind men, Miss Christie," he explained. "But we'll change the subject, if you please!"

"Anyway, it doesn't happen once in twenty years that a newspaper woman gets a scoop just because she's a woman," I continued, not being ready just then to change the subject even if he had demanded it.

93

"It does," he contradicted. "It's one of the most popular plots for magazine stories."

"Bah! Magazine stories and life are two different propositions, my dear Captain Macauley!" I explained with a blasé air. "I should like some better precedent before I started out on an assignment."

"Yet you are a most unprecedented young woman," he replied in a meaning tone. "I've suspected it before—but recent reports confirm my worst imaginings."

I glanced at him searchingly.

"You've been talking with mother?" I ventured.

For a moment he was inscrutable.

"Oh, I know you have!" I insisted. "She's told it to everybody who will listen."

"The story of the Coburn-Colt that wasn't hatched?"

His face was severe, but the little upward twist of his left shoulder was twitching as if with suppressed emotion.

94

"She told you with tears in her eyes, I know," I kept on. "All the old friends get the tearful accompaniment."

"Well, miss, doesn't that make you all the more ashamed of your foolishness?" he demanded.

"My foolishness?"

Something seemed to give way under me as he said this, for he was always on my side, and I had never found sympathy lacking before.

"I mean that—that Don Quixote carried to an extreme becomes Happy Hooligan," he pronounced.

I drew back in amazement.

"Why, Captain Horace Macauley—of Company A—18th Kentucky Infantry!"

He tried hard not to smile.

"You needn't go so far back—stay in the present century, if you please."

"But ever since then—even to this good day and in a newspaper office, where the atmosphere is so cold-blooded that a mosquito couldn't fly around without getting a congestive chill, you know your reputation! Why, you could give the Don horse spurs and armor, then arrive a full week ahead of him at a windmill!"

95

"Tommy-rot."

"Supererogation is a prettier word," I amended, but he shook his head.

"No! Six syllables are like six figures—they get you dizzy when you commence fooling with them! Besides, I was discussing *your* right to commit foolish acts of self-sacrificing, Grace, not mine."

"But it didn't seem foolish to me," I tried to explain.

"When you're working in this rotten newspaper office, where no woman could possibly feel at home, for the vigorous sum of seventy-five dollars a month?—Then it doesn't seem idiotic?"

"No!"

"And your mother moping and pining for the things she ought to have?"

"No-o—not much!"

96

"And Guilford Blake standing by, waiting like a gentleman for this fever of emancipation to pass by and desquamation to take place?"

This interested me.

"What's 'desquamation?'" I asked. "I haven't time to get my dictionary now."

"You couldn't find it in any save a medical dictionary, likely," he explained, with a pretense at patience. "Anyway, it's the peeling off process which follows a high fever—especially such fevers as you girls of this restless, modern temperament so often experience!"

I shivered.

"Ugh! It doesn't sound pretty!" I commented.

"Nor is it pretty," he assured me, "but it's very wholesome. Once you've caught the fever, lived through it, peeled off and got a shiny new skin you're forever immune against its return. This, of course, is what Guilford is waiting so patiently for. He is one of the most estimable young fellows I know, Grace, and—"

97

I looked wounded.

"Don't you suppose I know that?" I asked. Then glancing quickly at the watch bracelet on my wrist, and seeing with a gasp of relief that the hands were pointing toward the dangerous hour of three, I turned toward the door.

"I must hurry!" I plead. "You've really no idea what an interesting occasion a Flag Day celebration is, Captain Macauley!"

"No?" he smiled, understanding my sudden determination to leave.

"Indeed, no! Why, for three hundred and sixty-four days in the year you may have a gentle Platonic affection for General Washington, Paul Revere and the rest, but on the other day—Flag

Day—your flame is rekindled into a burning zeal! You can't afford to be late! You must hurry!— Especially if you have to go there on the street-car!"

"It's a deuced pity you can't get up a zeal for a devoted *living* man," he called after me in a severe voice as I reached the door. "It's a pity you can't see the idiocy of this determination of yours— before that publishing company revokes its offer." 98

"Well, who knows?" I answered, waving him a gay good-by. "I hate street-cars above everything, and I'm sorry my coupé isn't waiting at the door right now!" 99

CHAPTER VI

FLAG DAY

Now, according to my ethics, there are two kinds of men who go to daylight parties—idiots and those that are dragged there by their wives.

I had scarcely crossed the lawn of Seven Oaks and found for myself a modest place beside the speaker's stand—which was garlanded with as many different kinds of flags as there were rats in Hamelin Town—when I observed that this present congregation held a fair sprinkling of each kind.

But these held my attention for only a moment—because of the house in the background, and the trees overhead. (To be candid, Mrs. Hiram Walker's country place is not exactly a soothing retreat to visit when temptation is barking at your heels like a little hungry dog—and the desire of your heart begins with H.) 100

"House that's a Home" might have been written on the sign-board of the car-station much more truthfully than "Seven Oaks"—for only the immense patriarchal ones were included in the "Seven" there being hordes of lesser ones which were no more mentioned than children are when they're getting big enough to be paying railroad fare. The grove was well cared for, but not made artificial, and even the luxuriousness of the house itself could not hurt the charm, for the Hiram Walkers were human beings before they were society column acrobats.

Our families had always been friends, so I happened to know that years and years ago, when Mr. Walker was a clerk in an insurance office—with a horse and buggy for business through the week and joy unconfined on Sunday—they had been in the habit of haunting this spot, he and his slim young wife—bringing a basket full of supper and thrusting the baby's milk bottle down into the ice-cream freezer. Then, there were more years, of longing and saving; they bought the hill, patiently enduring a period of blue-prints and architectural advice before the house was built. By this time Mrs. Walker's slimness was gone, and Mr. Walker had found out the vanity of hair tonics—but the house was theirs at last. It was big and very beautiful—roomy, rather than mushroomy—and thoughtful, rambling, old-timey, spreading out a great deal of portico to the kiss of the sun. Brown-hooded monks and clanking beads ought, by rights, to have gone with that portico. 101

Then, the June sunshine was doing such wonders with the oaks, great and small, along the hillsides!

It touched up, with a tinge of glory, even the shining motor-cars in the driveway. There were dozens of them—limousines, touring cars, lady-like coupés—with their lazy, half-asleep attendants, and the regularity of their unbroken files, their dignity, their quietness, and the glitter of the sun against their metal gave them something of a martial aspect. The silver sheen of the lamps and levers was brought out in a manner to suggest a line of marching men, silent, but very potent—and enjoying more than a little what they offered to view, the dazzle of helmet, sword and coat-of-mail. 102

The beauty of it all—the softened glory of the shade in which I sat making me feel that I was a spectator at a tournament—cast a spell over me, for I never find it very hard to fall spellbound. Isn't it funny that when you're possessed of an intelligence which has fits of St. Vitus' dance they call it Imagination?—That's the kind mine is—jerky and unreliable. It is the kind of imagination which can take a dried-up acorn and draw forth a medieval forest; or gaze upon a rusty old spur and live over again the time when knights were bold.

But to get back to "those present."

First of all, I noted Oldburgh's best-known remittance man. I noted him mentally, mind you, not paragraphically, for they never made me do the real drudgery of the society page. He was sitting beside his mama, swinging her gauze fan annoyingly against her lorgnette chain. His divorce the year before had come near uniting Church and State, since it's a fact that nothing so cements conflicting bodies like the uprising of a new common foe; and he had sinned against both impartially. After him came two or three financial graybeards; three or four yearling bridegrooms, not broken yet to taking the bit between their teeth and staying rebelliously at the office; a habitual "welcomer to our city"—Major Harvey Coleman, a high officer in the Sons of the American Revolution, and the pièce de résistance of this occasion—then—then—! 103

Well, certainly the impassive being next him was the most unsocial-looking man I had ever had my eyes droop beneath the gaze of!

He was sitting in the place of honor—in the last chair of the first row—but despite this, he so clearly did not belong at that party, and he so clearly wished himself away that I—well, I instantly began searching through the crowds to find a woman with handcuffs! I felt sure that, whoever she might be—she hadn't got him there any other way!

104

And yet—and yet—(my thoughts were coming in little dashing jerks like that) he *was* rather too big for any one woman to have handled him!

I decided this after another look and another droop of my own eyes, for he was still looking—and that was what I decided about him first—that he was very *big*! Then misbehaving brown hair came next into my consciousness. It came to top off a picture which for a moment caused me to wonder whether he was really a flesh-and-blood man at Mrs. Walker's reception, or the spirit of some woodsman—come again, after many years, to haunt the grove of the Seven Oaks.

His New York clothes didn't make a bit of difference—except to spoil the illusion a little. They were all light gray, except for a glimpse of blue silk hose, and their perfection only served to remind you that it was a pity for a man who looked like *that* to dress like *that*!

105

Modern man has but one artistic garment—a bathrobe; yet it wouldn't have relieved my feelings any if this man had been dressed in one. For he wasn't artistic—and certainly he wasn't modern!

Still, I felt the pity of it all, for he ought to have had better perceptions. He ought to have had his clothes and cosmic consciousness match! He ought to have been dressed in a coat of goatskin—and his knees ought to have been bare—and the rawhide thongs of his moccasins ought to have been strong and firm!

I had just reached this point in my plans for the change in his wardrobe, when our hostess bustled up and shooed me out of my quiet corner.

"Grace," she whispered, "move out a bit, will you, and let me crowd a man in over there—"

106

"In here?"

She nodded.

"Where he can't *escape*!" she explained.

I gathered up my opened sheet of copy paper and moved obediently into the next chair, which she had indicated.

"That's right—thank you! I've found out by experience that if you let certain suspicious characters linger on the ragged edges of a crowd like this they're sure to disappear."

Then she turned and beckoned to my Fifth-Avenue-looking backwoodsman—with a smile of triumph.

"*Him?*" I asked in surprise.

She was looking in his direction, so failed to see the expression of my face.

"It's no more than he deserves—having this American Revolution rubbed in on him," she observed absently. "I have never worked so hard in my life over any one man as I have over this identical Maitland Tait!"

I saw him rise and come toward her—then I began having trouble with my throat. I couldn't breathe very easily.

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"Maitland Tait!" I gasped.

"Yes—*the* Maitland Tait!"

Her voice sounded with a brass-band echo of victory.

"But how did you—"

"By outwitting Pollie Kendall—plague take her!"

The man was coming leisurely, stopping once to speak to one of the graybeard financiers.

"Have you met him?" Mrs. Walker asked carelessly, as he approached.

"No."

She turned to him.

"I'm going to put you in here—where you'll have to stay," she laughed, her big, heavy frame looking dwarfed beside his own towering height.

"I wasn't going to run away."

"No? You can't always tell—and I thought it safe to take every precaution, for this lecture may be long, and it's certain to be irritating to one of your nationality.—In this location you'll be in the clutches of the Press, you see, and—by the way, you must meet Miss Christie!—Mr. Tait, Miss

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Christie!"

His face was still perfectly impassive, and he bowed gravely—with that down-to-the-belt grace which foreigners have. I nodded the pink satin rose on my hat in his direction. This was all! Neither made any further demonstration than that!—And to think that since Creation's dawn—the world over—the thing is done just as idly and carelessly as that! "Mr. Tait, Miss Christie!"—These are the words which were said—and, dear me, all the days of one's life ought to be spent in preparation for the event!

"You are a Daughter of the Revolution, I presume?" his voice finally asked me—a deep clear voice, which was strong enough to drown out the Wagnerian processions beating at that moment against my brain, and to follow me off on the mother-of-pearl cloud I had embarked upon. It was a glorious voice, distinctly un-American, but with the suggestion of having the ability to do linguistic contortions. He looked like a man who had traveled far—over seas and deserts—and his voice confirmed it. It proclaimed that he could bargain with equal ease in piasters and pence. Still, it was a big wholesome voice. It matched the coat of goatskin, the bare knees and the moccasins I had planned for him. 109

"Yes, I am," I answered.

Our eyes met for an instant, as he disengaged his gaze from that ten-barred insignia on my coat. Far, far back, concealed by his dark iris, was a tinge of amused contempt.

"Then I dare say you're interested in this occasion?" he inquired. I shouldn't say that he inquired, for he didn't. His tone held a challenge.

"No, indeed, I'm not!" I answered foolishly. "I came only because I have to write up Major Coleman's speech for my paper. I am a special writer for the *Herald*." 110

And it was then that he smiled—really smiled. I saw a transformation which I had never seen in any other man's face, for with him a smile escapes! There is a breaking up of the ruggedness, an eclipse of the stern gravity for a moment, and—no matter how much you had cared for these an instant before—you could not miss them then—not in that twinkling flood of radiance!

"Oh—so you're not an ancestor-worshiper?"

"No."

"But I thought Americans were!" he insisted.

"Americans?" I repeated loftily. "Why, of course, that's an English—religion."

"Not always," he answered grimly, and the Italian band stationed behind the clump of boxwood cut short any further conversation.

I was glad, for I did not want to talk to him then. I merely wanted to stand off—and look at him—and tell myself what manner of man he must be.

To do this I glanced down at my copy paper, with one eyelid raised in favor of his profile. An ancestor-worshiper? Absurd! Ancestors were quite out of the question with him, I felt sure. There was something gloriously *traditionless* about his face and expansive frame. But his hands? Those infallible records of what has gone before?—I dropped my eyes to their normal position. His hands were *good*! They were big and long and brown—that shade of brownness that comes to a meerschaum pipe after it has been kissed a time or two by nicotine. And his hair was brown, too light by several shades to match with his very dark eyes, but it likely looked lighter on account of its conduct, standing up, and away, and back from his face. His complexion spoke of an early-to-bed and early-to-tub code of ethics. His nose and mouth were well in the foreground. 111

"You are a man who cares nothing at all for your ancestors—but you'll care a great deal for your descendants!" was the summing up I finally made of him. 112

At the close of the band's Hungarian Rhapsody he leaned over and whispered to me.

"Did you say the *Herald*?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I have had my—attention called to your paper recently," he said, in so serious a tone that I was compelled to look up and search for the smile which I felt must lurk behind it. And when I saw it there I felt reassured, and smiled in response.

"So they told me at the office," I said with great cordiality. "Is it three or four of our reporters you've thrown down your front steps?"

"Oh, I haven't got close enough to them to throw them down the steps," he disclaimed quickly. "That's one thing you have to guard against with reporters. They've got you—if they once see the whites of your eyes!"

I felt it my duty to bristle, in defense of my kind.

"Not unless your eyes *talk*," I said. Then, when he stared at me in uncertainty for a moment, I dropped my own eyes again, for I felt that they were proclaiming their convictions as loudly as a Hyde Park suffragette meeting. 113

The band at that moment struck up *The Star-Spangled Banner* in a manner to suggest the president's advent into the theater, and I searched in my bag for my pencil. I had seen the lecturer cough.

"I say—how long is this convocation supposed to last?" Maitland Tait inquired in a very inconspicuous whisper, as the white-flanneled lion of the affair arose from his chair and became the cynosure of lorgnettes.

"Well, this talk will absorb about forty-five minutes, I should hazard," I said. Already I had had the forethought to jot down the usual opening: "Ladies and Gentlemen—Daughters and Sons of the American Revolution: It is with a feeling of profoundest pleasure that I have the privilege of being with you to-day," etc. So for the moment my attention was undivided.

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"And there will be other talks?"

"Yes."

"And a walk through the gardens, I believe Mrs.—Mrs. Walker said?"

"Probably so. The Seven Oaks gardens are very lovely in June."

At the mention of gardens his eyes wandered, with what I fancied was a tinge of homesickness, toward the colorful flowering spaces beyond the box hedges. There were acres and acres of typical English gardens back there; and the odor of the sweet old-fashioned shrubs came in on gentle heat waves from the open area. He looked as if he would like to be back there in those English-looking gardens—with all the people gone.

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CHAPTER VII

STRAWS POINT

"And are you going to write up the whole thing?" he inquired, during a little commotion caused by one of the large flags slipping from its stand and threatening to obscure the speaker.

"You mean make a society column report of it?"

"Yes."

"No. I'm a sort of special feature writer on the *Herald*, and I am to get only this speech of Major Coleman's to put in my Sunday page."

The lecture had commenced in good earnest by this time, and I was scribbling away in shorthand as I talked.

"Not one among us is insensible to the visions of patriotic pride and affection which the very name of 'Old Glory' conjures up within us, but at the same time we may do well to review, quite dispassionately, once in a while the wonderful chain of historical changes which came about in evolving this flag to its present form.... For we all realize that there is no perfect thing in this world which has not been an evolution from some imperfect thing.... When Pope Gregory, the—Somethingth, I quite failed to catch his number—"granted to Scotland the white cross of St. Andrew, and to England the red cross of St. George, he faintly surmised what a tempest in a teapot he was stirring up!"

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He paused, and the man at my side got in a word, edgewise.

"All of it?" he asked, looking aghast at the pages of long-tailed dots and dashes under my hand. I laughed.

"I'm paid to do it," I answered. "I don't disfigure my handwriting this way for nothing."

"But—but—you must be very clever," he commented, so appalled at the thought that he forgot he was talking to a stranger. I like that faculty. I like a man who dares to be awkwardly sincere.

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"Not clever—only very needy," I replied, turning over the page as I saw the lecturer replace the white flag of St. Andrew into its stand and take up the thread of his talk. "And I don't know that I need get every word of the discourse. The women who read my page don't care a rap about flags—but they do care to see a picture of Major Coleman and his wife and their dog on the piazza of their winter home, just out from Tampa!—I've got to have enough of this lecture to carry that picture."

He nodded gravely.

"I see. But after you get this report?"

"I'm going back to the city," I answered. "I have to catch the five o'clock car in."

"... The jealousy became so fierce between the two nations—the absurd jealousy over which should first salute the flag of the other—St. George claiming great superiority in the way of

godliness over St. Andrew, and St. Andrew, with the true Scotch spirit, stiffening his neck to the breaking point, while waiting for St. George to take off his hat to him, that when the story of this dissension reached the ears of Pope Gregory, he—"

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I never knew what he did until afterward, for at that moment I saw Maitland Tait slip his watch out carefully, guarding the action with an outspread left hand.

"I've an engagement at five, too," he said.

"... He determined to lose no time," was the next sentence I found myself jotting down on paper, and wondering whether Major Coleman had really said such a thing or whether it had been born in my mind of the stress of the moment.... "He was a man of the most impulsive, sometimes of the most erratic, actions."

"Of course!" my heart said between thumps. "I shouldn't like him if he were not."

"I can make my excuses to Mrs. Walker at the same time you make yours," the deep voice said, in a surprisingly soft tone.

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"... For he saw in such a course protection and peace," Major Coleman announced. "All the world suspected that his ultimate aim was union, but—"

"An international alliance," my heart explained, as I jotted down the words of the lecturer.

"Mayn't I take you back to town in my car?"

"... And all the world knew that he was a man absolutely untrammelled by tradition," the white-flanneled one proclaimed.

"Thank you, that would be lovely, but I'm afraid Mrs. Walker won't consent to your going so soon," I said between curlicues.

"I'm going, however," he answered. "I've an important engagement, and—I'm not going to stay at this—this," he closed his lips firmly, but the silence said "*cussed*," that dear, fierce, American adjective. "I'm not going to stay at this party one minute after you're gone. I don't like to talk to just any woman."

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"... Yet I would have you understand that he was a temperamental man," was thundered in a warning tone from the speaker's stand. "He was quick in judgment and action, but he was fine and sensitive in spirit. I've never a doubt that he disliked and feared the occasion which caused this precipitate action. He was quaking in his boots all the time, but he was courageous. He decided to make brief work of formalities and take a short cut to his heart's desire."

"What was it he did?" I asked of Mr. Tait, startled at the thought of what I'd missed. "Do you know what this thing was that Pope Gregory did?"

"No-o—listen a minute!" he suggested.

"... Can't you just imagine now that he was afraid of what people might say—or do?" asked the major encouragingly. "It was absolutely unprecedented in the annals of history—such a quick, rash and sudden decision. If England and Scotland were going to be eternally bickering over their flags, they should have *one* flag! They should be united! They should—"

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"The *Union Jack*!" whispered the deep voice close at my side, while the grave dark eyes lighted, as—as they should have lighted, or I'd never have forgiven him. "He created the Union Jack, by George!"

And the speaker on the stand demonstrated the truth of this conclusion by displaying a big British flag, which caught in its socket as he attempted to lift it and occasioned another pause in the speech.

"This enthusiasm makes me hungry," Maitland Tait observed, as the audience courteously saluted the ancient emblem of hostility, and the echoes of applause died away. "Since we're going to get no tea here, can't we drive by some place up-town? There's a good-looking place in Union Street —"

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"But that would make you very late for your engagement, I'm afraid," I demurred. "It will take some little time to drive in."

He looked at me wonderingly for a moment.

"My engagement? Oh, yes—but it can wait."

"Then, if it can, I'm afraid Mrs. Walker will not let you off. I happen to know that—"

He cut short my argument by motioning me to pay attention to the speaker, who at the moment had replaced the flag of Pope Gregory's cunning, and was talking away at a great rate.

"... Yet, who can say that the hastiest actions do not often bring about the best results? Certainly when a decision is made out of an excessive desire to bring happiness to all parties concerned, its immediate action can not fail to denote a wholesome heartiness which should always be emulated.... Different from most men of his native country, possessing a genuinely warm heart, a subtle mentality, coupled with a conscience which impelled him always toward the right, he was

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enabled, by this one impetuous act, to become a benefactor of mankind! What he longed for was harmony—a harmonious union; and what he has achieved has been the direct outcome of a great longing. He created a union—wholesome, strengthening and permanent," I took down in shorthand.

I have a confused impression—I suppose I should say post-impression, for I didn't remember anything very clearly until afterward—that Betsy Ross, Pope Gregory, the Somethingth, and Mrs. Hiram Walker were all combining to tie my hands and feet together with thongs of red, white and blue.

It seemed hours and hours before that lecture ended, then more hours before the tall restless man and I could make our way through a sea of massaged faces to a distant point where our hostess stood giving directions to a white-coated servant.

She turned to me, with a fluttering little air of regret, when I reached her side.

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"Grace, surely you don't have to hurry off at this unchristian hour!" she insisted. "My dear, you really should stay! Solinski has arranged the loveliest spread, and I'm not going to keep the company waiting forever to get to it, either!—The ices will be the surprise of the season."

"I'm sorry," I began, but she interrupted me.

"Why *didn't* your mother come?"

Already her vague regret over my own hasty departure had melted away, and as she saw the tall man following me, evidently bent upon the same mission as mine, she put her query in a perfunctory way to hide her chagrin.

"Mother couldn't come, Mrs. Walker. There is only one D. A. R. pin in the family, as you know—and I had to wear that."

Maitland Tait, looking over my shoulder, heard my explanation and smiled.

"It is a great deprivation to miss the rest of your charming party, Mrs. Walker," he began, but as he mentioned going, in a cool final voice, our hostess emitted a little terrified shriek.

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"What? Not you, too!"

His face was the picture of deep contrition.

"I *am* sorry," he said, as only an Englishman can say it, and it always sounds as if he were digging regret up out of his heart with a shovel, "but I have an important engagement that really can not wait—"

"And the General Seth O'Callen Chapter fairly holding its breath to meet you!" she wailed, the despair in her voice so genuine that it was impossible to keep back a smile. "That is our chapter composed entirely of *young* women, you know, and I'd given their regent my word of honor that you'd be here to-day!"

"Which the Regent has entirely forgotten in the charm of that delightful lecture we've just heard, I'm sure," he answered, his tones regretfully mollifying. "If it were at all possible for me to get word to the man—the men—"

The rest of the fabrication was cut short and drowned out by the shriek of a trolley-car, grinding noisily round a curve of the track at that instant. It was the five-o'clock car, and I had grown to watch for its shriek as fearfully as ever Cinderella listened for the stroke of twelve from the castle clock. For me there was never a garden party without its trolley-car back to the city—its hateful, five-o'clock car—its hurried, businesslike, hungry summons—while ice in tea glasses tinkled to the echo.

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From force of long habit now that grinding sound of the car-wheels acted upon my nervous system like a fire alarm upon an engine horse—and I started to run.

"Charming party—so sorry to have to rush off this way—hope next time I'll not be so busy—yes, I'll tell mother!"

I gathered the folds of copy paper close, having forgotten to thrust them away out of sight into my bag, and made a break for the front gate. Then, as I reached the line of waiting motor-cars, I remembered—and stopped still with a foolish little feeling.

Looking back I saw Mrs. Walker shaking hands in an injured fashion with her troublesome lion—who, after the manner of lions, proved that he could afford anxiety as well after being caught as before,—and turning her back resolutely upon his departing glory.—The whole of the General Seth O'Callen Chapter was before her, I knew she was thinking bitterly.

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"Thank goodness she won't see this!" I volunteered to myself, as the tall gray figure came hastily down the line and caught up with me. "She has troubles enough of her own, and—and she won't stop to wonder over whether I went back to the city by trolley, motor, or chariot of fire!"

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CHAPTER VIII

LONGEST WAY HOME

"You hadn't forgotten?" he inquired, coming up behind me with an expression of uneasiness as I passed the first two or three cars in the line.

"No—that is, I forgot for only a moment! I'm so used to going to town on this trolley-car."

"Then—ah, here we are—"

The limousine to which I was conducted was a gleaming dark-blue affair, with light tan upholstery, and the door-knobs, clock-case and mouth-piece of the speaking-tube were of tortoise-shell.

The chauffeur touched something and the big creature began a softened, throbbing breathing. Isn't it strange how we can not help regarding automobiles as *creatures*? Sometimes we think of them as gliding swans—at other times as fiery-eyed dragons. It all depends upon whether *we're* the duster, or the dustee. 129

I gained the idea as I stepped into this present one—which of course belonged to the gliding swan variety—that its master must be rather ridiculously well-to-do—for a cave-man. His initials were on the panels, and the man at the wheel said, "Mr. Tait, sir," after a fashion that no American-trained servant, white, black, or almond-eyed, ever said. Evidently the car had come down from Pittsburgh and the chauffeur had made a longer journey. Together, however, they spelled perfection—and luxury. Still, strange to say, the notion of this man's possible wealth did not get on my throat and suffocate me, as the notion of Guilford's did. I felt that the man himself really cared very little about it all. The idea of his being a man who could do hard tasks patiently did not fade in the glamour of this damask and tortoise-shell.

"Which is—the longest way to town?" he asked in a perfectly grave, matter-of-fact way as we started. 130

"Down this lane to the Franklin Pike, then out past Fort Christian to Belcourt Boulevard—and on to High Street," I replied in a perfectly grave, matter-of-fact way, as if he were a tubercular patient, bound to spend a certain number of hours in aimless driving every day.

"Thank you," he answered very seriously, then turned to the chauffeur.

"Collins, can you follow this line? I think we drove out this way the day the car came?"

"Oh, yes, sir—thank you," the man declared, slipping his way in and out among the throngs of other vehicles.

Then as we whirled away down the pike I kept thinking of this man—this young Englishman, who had come to America and elevated himself into the position of vice-president and general-manager of the Consolidated Traction Company, but, absurdly enough, no thought of the limousine nor the traction company came into my musings. I thought of him as a spirit—a spirit-man, who had lived in the woods. He had dwelt in a hut—or a cave—and toiled with his hands, hewing down trees, burning charcoal, eating brown bread at noon. Then, at dusk, he laid aside his tools, rumbling homeward in a great two-wheeled cart, whistling as he went, but softly—because he was deep in thought. 131

The seven *ages* of man are really nothing to be compared in point of interest with the different conditions of mind which women demand of them.

Very young girls seek about—often in vain—for a man who can compel; then later, they demand one who can feel; afterward their own expansion clamors for one who can understand—but the final stage of all is reached when the feminine craving can not be satisfied save by the man who can *achieve*.

This, of course, indicates that the woman herself is experienced—sometimes even to the point of being a widow—but it is decidedly a satisfying state of mind when it is once reached, because it is permanent. 132

And your man of achievement is pretty apt to be an uncomplicated human. His deepest "problem" is how to make the voices of the nightingale and alarm clock harmonize. For he is a lover between suns—and a *laborer* during them.

At Solinski's Japanese tea-room in Union Street, the limousine slowed up. The band was playing *The Rosary* as we went in, for it was the hour of the afternoon for the professional seers and seen of Oldburgh's medium world to drop in off the sidewalks for half an hour and dawdle over a tutti-frutti. The ultra-sentimental music always gets such people as these—and the high excruciating notes of this love-wail were ringing out with an intense poignancy.

"Each hour a pearl—each pearl a prayer—"

"Which table do you prefer?" my companion asked me, but for a moment I failed to answer. I was looking up at the clock, and I saw that the hands were pointing to six. I had met Maitland Tait at four!—Thus I had two pearls already on my string, I reckoned. 133

"Oh, which table—well, farther back, perhaps!"

I came down to earth after that, for getting acquainted with the caprices of a man's appetite is distinctly an earthly joy. Yet it certainly comes well within the joy class, for nothing else gives you the comfortable sense of possession that an intimate knowledge of his likes and dislikes bestows.

Just after the "each-hour-a-pearl" stage you begin to feel that you have a *right* to know whether he takes one lump or two! And the homely, every-day joys are decidedly the best. You don't tremble at the sounds of a man's rubber heels at the door, perhaps, after you're so well acquainted with him that you've set him a hasty supper on the kitchen table, or your fingers have toyed with his over the dear task of baiting a mouse-trap together—but he gets a dearness in this phase which a pedestal high as Eiffel Tower couldn't afford.—It is this dearness which makes you endure to see Prince Charming's coronet melted down into ducats to buy certified milk! 134

"And what are—those?" Maitland Tait asked, after the tea-service was before us, and I had poured his cup. He was looking about the place with a frank interest, and his gaze had lighted upon a group of marcelled, manicured manikins at a near-by table. They were chattering and laughing in an idly nervous fashion.

I dropped in two lumps of sugar and passed him his cup.

"They are wives," I answered.

"What?"

"Just wives."

Being English, it took him half a second to smile—but when he did I forgave him the delay.

"*Just* wives? Then that means not mothers, nor helpmeets, nor—"

"Nor housekeepers, nor suffragettes, nor saints, nor sinners, nor anything else that the Lord intended, nor apprehended," I finished up with a fierce suddenness, for that was what Guilford wanted me to be. "They're *just* wives." 135

He stirred his tea thoughtfully.

"That's what I find all over America," he said, but not with the air of making a discovery. "Men must work, and women must *eat*."

"And the sooner it's over the sooner to—the opera," I said.

He looked at me in surprise.

"Then you recognize it?" he asked.

"Recognize it? Of course *I* recognize it—but I'm not a fair sample. I work for my living."

He was silent for a moment, looking at the manikins with a sort of half-hearted pity.

"If they could all be induced to work they'd not be what they are—to men," he observed.

"To men?"

"I find that an American wife is a tormenting side-issue to a man's busy life," he said, with a tinge of regret. "And I am sorry, too—for they are most charming. For my part, I should like a woman who could do things—who was clever enough to be an inspiration." 136

I nodded heartily, forgetful of personalities.

"I too like the workers in the world," I coincided. "My ideal man is one whose name will be made into a verb."

He laughed.

"Like Marconi, eh, and Pasteur—and—"

"And Boycott, and Macadam, and—oh, a host of others!"

It was quite a full minute before he spoke again.

"I don't see how I could make my name into a verb," he said quietly, "but I must begin to think about it. It is certainly a valuable suggestion."

It was my turn to laugh, which I did, nervously.

"In Oldburgh, Tait seems to stand for the opposite of dictate," I hazarded. "That means to *talk*, and you won't—talk."

"But I am talking," he insisted. "I'm asking you questions as fast as ever I can." 137

"However, your technique is wrong," I replied. "You shouldn't ask questions of a newspaper woman. You should let her ask the questions, and you should furnish the answers."

"But you're not a newspaper woman now, are you?" he demanded in some alarm. "I hope not—and certainly I must ask you questions before I begin to tell you things. There are quite a few

facts which I wish to find out now."

"And they are, first—?"

"Where you live?"

I told him, and he took from his pocket a small leather book with his name, Maitland Tait, and an address in smaller letters which I could not make out, on the inside lining. In a small, rather cramped hand, he wrote the address I gave him, "1919 West Clydemont Place," then looked up at me.

"Next?" I laughed, in a flutter.

"Next I want to know when you will let me come to see you?"

"When?" I repeated, rather blankly.

He drew slightly back.

"I should have said, of course, *if* you will let me come, but—"

"But I shall be very glad to have you come," I made haste to explain. "I—I was only thinking!"

I was thinking of my betrothed—for the first time that afternoon.

"The length of time I am to stay in the South is very uncertain," he went on to explain with a gentle dignity. "At first it appeared that I might have to make a long stay, but we are settling our affairs so satisfactorily that I may be able to get back to Pittsburgh at any time now. That's why I feel that I can't afford to lose a single day in doing the really important things."

"Then come," I said, with a friendly show, which was in truth a desperate spirit of abandon.

"Come some day—"

"To-morrow?" he asked.

"To-morrow—at four."

But during the rest of the meal grandfather and Uncle Lancelot came and took their places on either side of me. They were distinctly *de trop*, but I could not get rid of them.

"This is—really the wrong thing to do, Grace," grandfather said, so soberly that when I rose to go and looked in the mirror to see that my hat was all right, his own sad blue eyes were looking out at me in perplexed reproach. "—Very wrong."

Then the sad blue eyes took in the lower part of my face. I believe I've neglected to say that there is a dimple in my chin, and Uncle Lancelot's spirit is a cliff-dweller living there. He comes out and taunts the thoughtful eyes above.

"Nonsense, parson!" he expostulated jauntily now. "Look on the lips while they are red! She's *young!*"

"Youth doesn't excuse folly," said grandfather severely.

"It exudes it, however," the other argued.

I turned away, resolutely, from their bickering. I had enough to contend with besides them—for suddenly I had begun wondering what on earth mother *would* say, after she'd said: "Grace, you amaze me!"

CHAPTER IX

MAITLAND TAIT

The only difference between the houses in West Clydemont Place and museums was that there was no admission fee at the front door. Otherwise they were identical, for the "auld lang syne" flavor greeted you the moment you put foot into that corner of the town. You knew instinctively that every family there owned its own lawn-mower and received crested invitations in the morning mail.

Yet it was certainly not fashionable! Indeed, from a butler-and-porte-cochère standpoint it was shabby. The business of owning your own lawn-mower arises from a state of mind, rather than from a condition of finances, anyway. We were poor, but aloof—and strung high with the past-tension. The admiral, the ambassador and the artist rubbed our aristocracy in on any stray caller who lingered in the hall, if they had failed to be pricked by it on the point of grandfather's jeweled sword in the library.

I saw 1919 through a new vista as I came up to it in the late dusk, following the Flag Day reception, and I wondered what the effect of all this antiquity would be on the mind of a man who so clearly disregarded the grandfather clause in one's book of life. I hoped that he would be

amused by it, as he had been by the long-tailed D. A. R. badge on my coat.

"You'd better have a little fire kindled up in the library, Grace," mother observed chillingly just after lunch that next afternoon. "It's true it's June, but—"

"But the day *is* bleak and raw," I answered, with a sudden cordial sense of relief that she was on speaking terms with me again. "Certainly I'll tell Cicely to make a fire."

"The dampness of the day has nothing at all to do with it," she kept on with frozen evenness. "I suggested it because a fire is a safe place for a girl to look into while her profile is being studied." 143

"Mother!"

Her sense of outraged propriety suddenly slipped its leash.

"It keeps her eyes looking earnest, instead of *eager*," she burst out. "And any girl who'd let a man—allow a man—to run away from a party whose very magnificence was induced on his account, and take her off to tea in a public place, and come to see her the very next afternoon—a stranger, and a foreigner at that—is—is playing with fire!"

"You mean she'd better be playing with fire while he's calling?" I asked quietly. "We must remember to have the old andirons polished, then."

She stopped in her task of dusting the parlor—whose recesses without the shining new player-piano suddenly looked as bare and empty as a shop-window just after the holidays. 144

"You wilfully ignore my warning," she declared. "If this man left that party yesterday and comes calling to-day, of course he's impressed! And if you let him, of course *you're* impressed. This much goes without saying; but I beg you to be careful, Grace! You happen to have those very serious, *betraying* eyes, and I want you to guard them while he's here!"

"By keeping my hands busy, eh?" I laughed. "Well, I'll promise, mother, if that'll be any relief to you."

So the fire was kindled, as a preventative measure; and at four o'clock he came—not on the stroke, but ten minutes after. I was glad that he had patronized the street railway service for this call, and left the limousine in its own boudoir—you couldn't imagine anything so exquisite being kept in a lesser place—or I'm afraid that our little white-capped maid would have mistaken it for an ambulance and assured him that nobody was sick. Gleaming blue limousines were scarce in that section. 145

"Am I early?" he asked, after we had shaken hands and he had glanced toward the fire with a little surprised, gratified expression. "I wasted a quarter of an hour waiting for this car."

Now, a woman can always forgive a man for being late, if she knows he started on time, so with this reassurance I began to feel at home with him. I leaned over and stirred the fire hospitably—to keep my eyes from showing just how thoroughly at home I felt.

"No—you are not early. I was expecting you at four, and—and mother will be down presently."

He studied my profile.

"I was out at the golf club dance last night," he said, after a pause, with a certain abruptness which I had found characterized his more important parts of speech. I stood the tongs against the marble mantelpiece and drew back from the flame.

"Was it—enjoyable?" I asked politely.

"Extremely. Mrs. Walker was there, and she had very kindly forgiven me for my defection of the afternoon. In fact, she was distinctly cordial. She talked to me a great deal of you and your mother." 146

My heart sank. It always does when I find that my women friends have been talking a great deal about me.

"Oh, did she?"

"She is very fond of you, it seems—and very puzzled by you."

"Puzzled because I work for the *Herald*?"

I spoke breathlessly, for I wondered if Mrs. Walker had told of the Guilford Blake puzzle, as well; but after one look into the candid half-amused eyes I knew that this information had been withheld.

"Well, yes. She touched upon that, among other things."

"But what things?" I asked impatiently. At the door I heard the maid with the tea tray. "I suppose, however, just the usual things that people tell about us. That we have been homeless and penniless—except for this old barn—since I was a baby, and that, one by one, the pomps of power have been stripped from us?" 147

He looked at me soberly for a moment.

"Yes, she told me all this," he said.

"And that our historic rosewood furniture was sold, years ago, to Mrs. Hartwell Gill, the grocer's wife who used the chair-legs as battering-rams?"

He smiled.

"Against Oldburgh's unwelcoming doors? Yes."

"And that—"

"That you belonged to the most aristocratic family in the whole state," he interrupted softly. "So aristocratic that even the possession of the rosewood furniture is an open sesame! And of course this state is noted for its blooded beings, even in my own country."

"Really?" I asked, with a little gratified surprise.

"Indeed, yes!" he replied earnestly. "And Mrs. Walker told me something that I had not in the least thought to surmise—that you are a descendant of the famous artist, Christie. I don't know why I happened not to think about it, for the name is one which an Englishman instantly connects with portrait galleries. He was very favorably known on our side." 148

"Yes. He had a very remarkable—a very pathetic history," I said.

Turning around, he glanced at a small portrait across the room.

"Is—is this James Christie?" he asked.

"Yes. There is a larger one in the hall."

He walked across the room and examined the portrait. After a perfunctory survey, which did not include any very close examination of the strong features—rugged and a little harsh, and by no means the glorious young face which had been a lodestar to Lady Frances Webb—he turned back to me. For a moment I fancied that he was going to say something bitter and impulsive—something that held a tinge of mass-hatred for class, but his expression changed suddenly. I saw that his impulse had passed, and that what he would say next would be an afterthought. 149

"Do you care for him—for this sort of thing?" he asked, waving his hand carelessly toward the other portraits in the room and toward the sword, lying there in an absurd sort of harmlessness beneath its glass case. "I imagined that you didn't."

He spoke with a tinge of disappointment. Evidently he was sorry to find me so pedigreed a person.

"I do—and I don't," I answered, coming across the room to his side and drawing back a curtain to admit a better light. "I certainly care for—him."

"The artist?"

"Yes."

"But why?" he demanded, with a sudden twist of perversity to his big well-shaped mouth. "To me it seems such a waste of time—this sentiment for romantic antiquity. But I am not an unprejudiced judge, I admit. I have spent all the days of my life hating aristocracy." 150

"Oh, my feeling for him is not caused by his aristocracy," I made haste to explain. "And indeed, the Christies were very commonplace people until he elevated them into the ranks of fame. He was not only an artist of note, but he was a very strong man. It is this part of his history that I revere, and when I was a very young girl I 'adopted' him—from all the rest of my ancestors—to be the one I'd care for and feel a pride in."

He smiled.

"Of course you don't understand," I attempted to explain with a little flurry. "No *man* would ever think of adopting an ancestor, but—"

He interrupted me, his smile growing gentler.

"I think I understand," he said. "I did the selfsame thing, years ago when I was a boy. But my circumstances were rather different from yours. I selected my grandfather—my mother's father, because he was clean and fine and strong! He was—he was a collier in Wales." 151

"A collier?" I repeated, wondering for the moment over the unaccustomed word.

"A coal-miner," he explained briefly. "He was honest and kind-hearted—and I took him for my example. He left me no heirlooms that—"

I turned away, looking at the room's furnishings with a feeling of reckless contempt.

"Heirlooms are—are a nuisance to keep dusted!" I declared quickly.

"Yet you evidently like them," he said, as we took our places again before the fire, and the little maid, in her nervous haste, made an unnecessary number of trips in and out. The firelight was glowing ruddily over the silver things on the tea-table, and looking up, I caught his eyes resting upon the ring I wore—Guilford's scarab. "That ring is likely an heirloom?"

"Yes—the story goes that Mariette himself found it," I elucidated, slipping the priceless old bit of stone off my hand and handing it to him to examine. 152

But as I talked my head was buzzing, for grandfather was at one ear and Uncle Lancelot was at the other.

"Grace, you ought to tell him!" grandfather commanded sharply. "Tell him this minute! Say to him: 'This ring is an heirloom in the family of my betrothed.'"

"*Rot*, parson!" came in Uncle Lancelot's dear comforting tones. "Shall a young woman take it for granted that every man who admires the color of her eyes is interested in her entire history?—Why, it would be absolutely indelicate of Grace to tell this man that she's engaged. It's simply none of his business."

"You'll see! You'll see!" grandfather warned—and my heart sank, for when a member of your family warns you that you'll see, the sad part of it is that you *will* see.

"It's a royal scarab, isn't it?" Maitland Tait asked, turning the ancient beetle over and viewing the inscription on the flat side. 153

"Yes—perhaps—oh, I don't know, I'm sure," I answered in a bewildered fashion. Then suddenly I demanded: "But what else did Mrs. Walker tell you? Surely she didn't leave off with the mention of one illustrious member of my family."

"She told me about your great-aunt—the queer old lady who left James Christie's relics to you because you were the only member of the family who didn't keep a black bonnet in readiness for her funeral," he laughed, as he handed me back the ring.

"They were just a batch of letters," I corrected, "not any other relics."

"Yes—the letters written by Lady Frances Webb," he said.

It was my turn to laugh.

"I knew that Mrs. Walker must have been talkative," I declared. "She didn't tell you the latest touch of romance in connection with those letters, did she?" 154

He was looking into the fire, with an expression of deep thoughtfulness; and I studied his profile for a moment.

"Late romance?" he asked in a puzzled fashion, as he turned to me.

"A publishing company has made me an offer to publish those letters! To make them into a stunning 'best-seller,' with a miniature portrait of Lady Frances Webb, as frontispiece, I dare say, and the oftenest-divorced illustrator in America to furnish pictures of Colmere Abbey, with the lovers mooning 'by Norman stone!'"

He was silent for a little while.

"No, she didn't tell me this," he finally answered.

"Then it is because she doesn't know it!" I explained. "You see, mother is still too grieved to mention the matter to any one by telephone—and it happens that she hasn't met Mrs. Walker face to face since the offer was made." 155

"And—rejected?" he asked, with a little smile.

"Yes, but how did you know?"

The smile sobered.

"There are some things one *knows*," he answered. "Yet, after all, what are you going to do with the letters? If you don't publish them now how are you going to be sure that some other—some future possessor will not?"

"I can't be sure—that's the reason I'm not going to run any risks," I told him. "I'm going to burn them."

He started.

"But that would be rather a pity, wouldn't it?" he asked. "She was such a noted writer that I imagine her letters are full of literary value."

"It would be a cold-blooded thing for *me* to do," I said thoughtfully. "I've an idea that some day I'll take them back to England and—and burn them there."

"A sort of feeling that they'd enjoy being buried on their native soil?" he asked.

"I'll take them to Colmere Abbey—her old home," I explained. "To me the place has always been a house of dreams! She describes portions of the gardens in her letters—tells him of new flower-beds made, of new walls built—of the sun-dial. I have always wanted to go there, and some day I shall bundle all these letters up and pack them in the bottom of a steamer trunk—to have a big bonfire with them on the very same hearth where she burned his." 157

CHAPTER X

IN THE FIRELIGHT

Again there was a silence, but it was not the kind of silence that gives consent. On the other hand his look of severity was positively discouraging.

"If I may inquire, what do you know about this place—this Colmere Abbey?" he finally asked. "I mean, do you know anything of it in this century—whether it's still standing or not—or anything at all save what your imagination pictures?"

It was a rather lawyer-like query, and I shook my head, feeling somewhat nonplused.

"No—nothing!"

"Then, if you should go to England, how would you set about finding out?"

"Oh, that wouldn't be so bad. In fact, I believe it would be a unique experience to go journeying to a spot with nothing more recent than a Washington Irving sketch as guide-book." 158

He looked at me half pityingly.

"You might be disappointed," he said gently. "For my part, I have never taken up a moment's time mooning about people's ancestral estates—I've had too much real work to do—but I happen to know that residents often fight shy of tourists."

I had a feeling of ruffled dignity.

"Of course—tourists!" I answered, bridling a little.

"Because," he hastened to explain, "the owners of the places can so often afford to live at home only a short season every year. Many of them are poor, and the places they own are mortgaged to the turrets."

"And the shut-up dilapidation would not make pleasant sight-seeing for rich Americans?"

He nodded.

"I happen to have heard some such report about this Colmere Abbey—years ago," he said. 159

"Are you sure it was the same place?" I asked, my heart suddenly bounding. "Colmere, in Lancashire?"

"Quite sure! I was brought up in Nottingham, and have heard of the estate, but have never seen it."

"Then it's still there—my house of dreams?"

For a moment I waited, palpitatingly, for him to say more, but he only looked at me musingly, then back into the fire. After a second he leaned forward, shaking his unruly hair back, as if he were trying to rid himself from a haunting thought.

"I—I can't talk about 'landed gentry,'" he said, turning to me with a quick fierceness. "I grow violent when I do! You've no idea how hateful the whole set is to a man who has had to make his own way in the world—against them!" Then, after this burst of resentment, his mood seemed to change. "But we must talk about England," he added, with a hasty gentleness. "There are so many delightful things we can discuss! Tell me, have you been there? Do you like it?" 160

I nodded an energetic affirmative.

"I have been there and—I love it! But it was a long while ago, and I wasn't old enough to understand about the things which would interest me most now."

"A long while ago?"

"Yes—let me see—ten years, I believe! At all events it was the summer after we sold the rosewood furniture—and the piano. Mother was so amazed at herself for having the nerve to part with the grand piano that she had to take a sea-voyage to recover herself."

"But what a happy idea!" he commented seriously, as he looked around. "A grand piano would really be a nuisance in this cozy room."

For a long time afterward I wondered whether my very deepest feeling of admiration for him had been born at the moment I looked at him first, or when he made this remark. But I've found it's as hard to ascertain Love's birthday as it is to settle the natal hour of a medieval author. 161

"How long have you been in America?" I next asked, abruptly; and he looked relieved.

"Ten years—off and on," he answered briskly. "Most of the time in Pittsburgh, for my grandfather had chosen that place for me. He would not have consented to my going back to England often, if he had lived, but I have been back a number of times, for I love journeying over the face of the earth—and, strange as it may seem, I love England. Some day—when things—when my affairs—are in different shape over there I shall go back to stay."

The tea things were finally arranged by Cicely's nervous dusky hands, and with a cordial showing of the letter-but-not-spirit-hospitality, mother appeared, in the wake of the steaming kettle.

Her expression said more plainly than words that she would do the decent thing or die.

"I was—" she began freezingly, as we both arose to greet her, "I was—" 162

She took in at a glance Maitland Tait's gigantic size, and shrank back—a little frightened. Then his good clothes reassured her. A giant who patronizes a good New York tailor is a *cut* above an ordinary giant, she evidently admitted.

"—detained," she added, with the air of making a concession. She accepted the chair he drew up for her, and his down-to-the-belt grace began making itself conspicuous. She looked him over, and her jaundiced eye lost something of its color.

"—*unavoidably*," she plead, with a regretful prettiness.

Then she made the tea, and when she saw how caressingly the big man's smooth brown hands managed his cup, the remaining thin layer of ice over her cordiality melted, and she became the usual charming mother of a marriageable daughter. While she was at all times absolutely loyal to Guilford, still she knew that a mother's appearance is a daughter's asset, and she had always laid up treasures for me in this manner.

"You were at Mrs. Walker's Flag Day reception yesterday Grace tells me?" she inquired as casually as if a bloody battle of words had not been waging over the occurrence all morning. "And Mrs. Kendall was talking with me this morning on the telephone about her dance Friday night—" 163

She paused, looking at him interrogatively, because that had been Mrs. Kendall's own emotion when mentioning the matter.

Mr. Tait glanced toward me.

"Ah, yes—I had forgotten! You will be there?"

"Yes," I answered hastily, and mother came near scalding the kitten on the rug in the excess of her surprise. All morning, through the smoke of battle, I had sent vehement protestations against having my white tissue redraped for the occasion, declaring that nothing could induce me to go.

"I find that one usually goes to no less than three social affairs on a trip like this—and I—well, I'm afraid I'm rather an unsocial brute! I select the biggest things to go to, for one has to talk less, and there is a better chance of getting away early," he explained. 164

Mother left the room soon after this—the sudden change of decision about the dance had been too much for her. Even perfect clothes and well-bred hands and a graceful waist-line could not make her forgive this in me. She made a hasty excuse and left.

Then our two chairs shifted themselves back into their former positions before the fire and we talked on in the gloaming. Somehow, since that outburst of anger against the present-day owners of Colmere Abbey, the vision of the big man—the cave-man—in the coat of goatskins, with the bare knees and moccasins, had come back insistently.

Yet it was just a vision, and after a few minutes it vanished—after the manner of visions since the world began. He looked out the window at the creeping darkness and rose to go.

"Then I'm to see you Friday night?" he asked at parting. 165

"Yes."

"I'm—I'm glad."

There had been a green and gold sunset behind the trees in the park across the way, and after a moment more he was lost in this weird radiance; then he suddenly came to view again, in the glow of electric light at the corner.

A car to the city swung round the curve just then, and a dark figure, immensely tall in the shadows, stepped from the pavement. I heard the conductor ring up a fare—a harsh metallic note that indicated *finality* to me—then silence.

"He's gone—gone—gone!" something sad and lonesome was saying in my heart. "What if he should be suddenly called back to Pittsburgh and I shouldn't see him again?"

To see the very last of him I had dropped down beside the front door, with my face pressed against the lace-veiled glass, and so intent was I upon my task that I had entirely failed to hear mother's agitated step in the hall above.

I was brought to, however, when I heard the click of the electric switch upon the stair. The lower hall was suddenly flooded with light. I scrambled to my feet as quickly as I could. Mother's face, peering at me from the landing, was already pronouncing sentence. 166

"Grace, I was just coming down to tell you that—well, I am compelled to say that you *amaze* me!" she emitted first, with a tone of utter hopelessness struggling through her newly-fired anger. "Down on your knees in your new gown—and gowns as scarce as angels' visits, too!"

"Ah—but—I'm sorry—"

"What on earth are you doing there?" she kept on.

I turned to her, blinking in the dazzling light.

"I was—let me see?—oh, *yes!*" A brilliant thought had just come to me. "—I was looking for the *key!*"

Now, I happen to hate a liar worse than anything else on earth, and I hated myself fervently as I told this one.

"The key?" she asked suspiciously.

167

"It—it had fallen on the floor," I kept on, for of course whatever you do you must do with all your might, as we learn in copy-book days.

"And it never occurred to you to turn on the light?" she demanded, coming up and looking at me as if to see the extent of disfigurement this new malady had wrought. "Down on your knees searching for a key—and it never occurred to you to turn on the light?"

"No," I answered, thankful to be able to tell the truth again. "No, it never once occurred to me!"

168

CHAPTER XI

TWO MEN AND A MAID

Have you ever thought that the reason we can so fully sympathize with certain great people of history, and not with others, is because we are occasionally granted a glimpse of the emotion our favorites enjoyed—or endured?

For instance, no man who has ever knocked the "t" out of "can't" stands beside Napoleon's tomb without a sensation which takes the form of: "*We* understand each other—don't we, old top?"

And every year at spring-time, Romeo is patted on the back condescendingly by thousands of youths—so susceptible that they'd fall in love with anything whose skirt and waist met in the back.

169

The night of the Kendalls' dance I knew what Cleopatra's cosmic consciousness resembled—exactly. I knew it from the moment she glanced away from the glint of her silver oars of the wonderful Nile barge (because the glint of Antony's dark eyes was so much more compelling) to the hour she recklessly unwrapped the basket of figs in her death chamber! I ran the whole gamut of her emotions—'twixt love and duty—and I came out of it feeling that—well, certainly I felt that a conservatory is a room where eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves!

"Is everybody crazy to-night?" I whispered to Guilford, as we paused for a moment before the dancing commenced just outside one of the downy, silky reception rooms—quite apart from the noisy ballroom farther back—and I saw two people inside. The girl was seated before the piano, and was singing softly, while the man stood at her side, listening with a rapt expression.

"Who would ever have thought that *that* girl would be singing *that* song to *that* man?" I asked, with a quivery little feeling that the world was going topsyturvy with other people besides me. The singer was the careless, rowdy golf champion of the state, and the man listening was Oldburgh's astonishing young surgeon—the kind who never went anywhere because it was said he laid aside his scalpel only when he was obliged to pick up his fork.

170

"What is the song?" Guilford inquired, looking in, then drawing back softly and dropping the curtain that screened the doorway.

"*Caro Mio Ben!*"

"A love song?"

I smiled.

"Well, rather!"

Then somebody crowded up and separated Guilford and me. I stood there listening to the lovely Italian words, and wondering if the night were in truth bewitched. Guilford, under the impulse induced by a white tissue gown and big red roses, had suffered an unusual heart-action already and had spent half an hour whispering things in my ear which made me feel embarrassed and ashamed. The only thing which can possibly make a lifelong engagement enduring is the brotherly attitude assumed by the lover in his late teens.

171

"Come in," he said, elbowing his way back to me through the chattering throng of the autumn's débutantes, after a few minutes. "I hear the violins beginning to groan—and say—*haven't* they got everybody worth having here to-night?"

"I don't—know," I replied vaguely, looking up and down the length of the room that we were entering.

"But—there's Mrs. Walker, and there are the Chester girls, and Dan Hunter, just back from Africa—and—"

"Certainly they've got a fine selection of Oldburgh's solid, rolled-gold ornaments," I commented dryly, as my eyes searched the other side of the room.

"Oh, besides local talent in plenty to create some excitement, there's an assortment of imported artists," he went on. "That French fellow, d'Osmond, has been teaching some of the kids a new figure and they're going to try it to-night. Have you met him?" 172

"Yes, indeed—oh, no, of course I haven't met him, Guilford!" I answered impatiently. "How could I meet a stray French nobleman? The society editor is *his* Boswell."

He turned away, hurt at my show of irritation, but I didn't care. I was in that reckless mood that comes during a great fire, or a storm at sea, or any other catastrophe when the trivialities of living fade into pygmy proportions before the vast desire for mere life.

"And there's that Consolidated Traction Company fellow," he said humbly, calling my attention to a bunch of new arrivals at the doors of the ballroom. "What's his name?"

"Maitland Tait."

"Have you met him?" he inquired.

Now usually Guilford is not humble, nor even very forgiving, so that when he turned to me again and showed that he was determined to be entertaining, I glanced at a mirror we happened to be passing. How easy it would be to keep men right where we wanted them if life could be carried on under frosted lights, in white tissue gowns, holding big red roses! 173

"Yes, I've met him," I answered giddily. "He was at Mrs. Walker's Flag Day reception Tuesday—and he brought me to town in his car, then came calling Wednesday afternoon, and—"

Guilford had stopped still and was looking at me as if anxious to know when I'd felt the first symptoms.

"Oh, it's true," I laughed desperately.

"Then why——"

"Didn't I tell you?"

"Yes—that is, you might have mentioned it. Of course, it really makes no difference—" He smiled, dismissing it as a triviality.

Gentle reader, I don't know whether your sympathies have secretly been with Guilford all the time or not—but I know that mine were distinctly with him at that moment. If there is ever a season when a woman's system is predisposed toward the malady known as sex love, it is when some man is magnanimous about another man. And Guilford's manner at that instant was magnanimous—and I already had fifty-seven other varieties of affection for him! I decided then, in the twinkling of my fan chain, which I was agitating rather mercilessly, that if Guilford were the kind of a man I *could* love, he'd be the very man I should adore. 174

—But he wasn't. And the kind I could love was disentangling himself from the group around the door and coming toward me at that very moment.

"Have you met him?" I asked of my companion, trying to pretend that the noise was my fan chain and not my heart.

"No."

In another instant they were shaking hands cordially.

"You'll excuse me a moment?" Guilford asked, turning to me—after he and Maitland Tait had propounded and answered perfunctory questions about Oldburgh. "I wanted to speak to—Delia Ramage." 175

I had never before in my life heard of his wishing to speak to Delia Ramage, but she was the nearest one to him, so he veered across to her side, while I was left alone with the new arrival. This is called heaping coals of fire.

"I was glad to see you—a moment ago," Maitland Tait said in that low intimate tone which is usually begotten only by daily or hourly thought. Take two people who have not seen each other for a week, nor thought of each other, and when they meet they will shrill out spontaneous, falsetto tones—but not so with two people whose spirits have communed five minutes before. They lower their voices when they come face to face, for they realize that they are before the sanctum. "You're looking most—unusually well."

He was not, but I refrained from telling him so. Most thoughtful men assume a look of constraint when they are forced to mingle with a shallow-pated, boisterous throng, and he was strictly of this type—I observed it with a thrill of triumph. 176

Yet the festive appearance of evening dress was not unbecoming to him. His was that kind of magnificent plainness which showed to advantage in gala attire, and I knew that even if I could

get him off to live the life of a cave-man, occasionally a processional of the tribe would cause him to thrust brilliant feathers into his goatskin cap and bind his sandals with gleaming new thongs. But then the martial excitement of a processional would cause his eyes to light up with a brilliancy to match the feathers in his cap, and a dance could not do this.

"Of course you're engaged for the first dance?" he asked, as the music began and a general commotion ensued. "I knew that I'd have to miss that—when I was late. But"—he came a step closer and spoke as if acting under some hasty impulse—"I want to tell you how very lovely I think you are to-night! I hope you do not mind my saying this? I didn't know it before—I thought it was due to other influences—but you are beautiful."

177

It was at this moment that the silver oars of the Nile barge were dimmed under the greater resplendence of dark eyes—and the purple silk sails closed out the sky, but closed in heaven. Cleopatra and I might have cut our teeth on the same coral ring, for all the inferiority I felt to her in that instant.

"I—I'm afraid—" I began palpitatingly, for you must know that palpitations are part of the Egyptian rôle—the sense of danger and wrong were what raised—or lowered—the flitting space of time out of the ordinary lover thrills. "I am afraid—"

"But you must not say that!" he commanded, his deep voice muffled. "This is just the beginning of what I wish to say to you."

I wrenched my eyes away from his—then looked quickly for Guilford. Grandfather Moore's warnings in my ear were choking the violin music into demoniac howls. I don't believe that any woman ever really enjoys having two men love her at the same time—and this is not contradicting what I've said in the above paragraph about Cleopatra. I never once said that I had *enjoyed* feeling like her—you simply took it for granted that I had!

178

"Aren't you going to dance—with some one?" I asked, turning back quickly, as Guilford's arm slipped about me and we started away into a heartless, senseless motion. Maitland Tait stood looking at me for an instant without answering, then swept his eyes down the room to where Mrs. Charles Sefton—a sister-in-law of the house of Kendall—and her daughter Anabel were standing. Mrs. Sefton was a pillar of society, and, if one *must* use architectural similes, Anabel was a block. They caught him and made a sandwich of him on the spot. I whirled away with Guilford.

179

At the end of the dance I found myself at the far end of the ballroom, close to a door that opened into a small conservatory. The dim green within looked so calm and uncomplicated beside the glare of light which surrounded me that I turned toward it—thirstily.

"I'm going in here to rest a minute, Guilford," I explained, setting him free with a little push toward a group of girls he knew. "You run along and dance with some of them. Men aren't any too plentiful to-night."

"No-o—I'll go with you," he objected lazily, slipping his cigarette case from his pocket. "You're too darned pretty to-night to stay long in a conservatory alone."

"But I'll not be alone," I replied, with a return of that frightful recklessness which tempted me to throw myself on his mercy and say: "I'm in love with this Englishman—madly in love! I have never been in love before—and I hope I shall never be again if it always feels like this!" Instead of saying this, however, I said, with a smile: "Don't think for a moment that I shall be alone. Grandfather and Uncle Lancelot will be with me."

180

He looked disgusted.

"What's going on in your conscience now?" he asked, with slightly primped lips.

"Something—that I'll tell you about later."

"But has it got to be threshed out to-night?" he demanded irritably. "I had hoped that we might spend this one evening acting like human beings."

"Still, it seems that we can't," I answered, with a foolish attempt to sound inconsequential. "Please let me sit down in here by myself for a little while, Guilford."

He turned on his heel, with an unflattering abruptness, and left me. I entered the damp, earthy-smelling room, where wicker tables held giant ferns, and a fountain drizzling sleepily in the center of the apartment, broke off the view of a green cane bench just beyond; I made for this settee and sank down dejectedly.

181

How long I sat there I could not tell—one never can, if you've noticed—but after a little while I heard the next dance start, and then three people, still in the position of a sandwich, entered.

"How warm it is to-night!" I heard Maitland Tait's voice suddenly proclaim, in a fretful tone, as if the women with him were responsible for the disagreeable fact. But he drew up a chair, rather meekly, and subsided into it. "This is the first really warm night we've had this summer."

"It seems like the irony of fate, doesn't it?" Anabel Sefton asked with a nervous little giggle. There are some girls who can never talk to a man five minutes without bringing fate's name into the conversation.

"We had almost no dances during April and May, when one really needed violence of some sort to

keep warm," her mother hastened to explain. "And now, at this last dance of the season, it is actually hot."

"The last big dance, mother."

182

"Of course!" Mrs. Sefton leaned toward the other two chairs confidentially. "A crush like this is too big," she declared.

"Oh, but I like the big affairs," Anabel pouted. "You never know then who you're going to run across! Just think of the unfamiliar faces here to-night! I happened up on Gayle Cargill and Doctor Macdonald down in the drawing-room a while ago—where they'd hidden to sing Italian, sotto voce!"

"Then Dan Hunter is here—for a wonder," her mother agreed, as if a recital of Oldburgh's submerged tenth were quite the most interesting thing she could think up for a foreigner's delectation, "and Grace Christie! Have you met Miss Christie, Mr. Tait?"

"Yes," he replied.

"She's gone in for newspaper work," Anabel elucidated.

"Just a pose," her mother hastily added. "She really belongs to one of our best families, and is engaged to Guilford Blake."

183

"But she won't marry him," Anabel said virtuously. "I'm sure *I* can't understand such a nature. They've been engaged all their lives and——"

"She doesn't deserve anything better than to lose him," her mother broke in. "If he should chance to look in some other direction for a while she'd change her tactics, no doubt."

"Oh—no doubt," echoed a deep male voice, the tones as cool as the water-drops plashing into the fountain beside him.

"Anyway, it's her kind—those women who would be sirens if the mythological age hadn't passed—who cause so much trouble in the world," Mrs. Sefton wound up. At fifty-two women can look upon sirens dispassionately.

After a while the music began throbbing again, and a college boy came up to claim Anabel. The trio melted quietly away. I rose from my chair and started toward the door when I saw that Maitland Tait had not left with the others. He was standing motionless beside the fountain.

184

I came up with him and he did not start. Evidently he had known all the while that I was in the room.

"Well?" he said, with a certain aloofness that strangely enough gave him the appearance of intense aristocracy. "Well?"

"Well—" I echoed, feebly, but before I could go away farther he had drawn himself up sharply.

"I was coming to look for you—to say good-by," he said.

"Good-by?" I repeated blankly. "You mean good night, don't you?"

"No."

Our eyes met squarely then, and mine dropped. They had hit against steel.

"And this is—good-by?" I plead, while I felt that wild wind and waves were beating against my body and that the skies were falling.

"Of course!" he answered harshly. "What else could it be?"

I think that we must have stood there in silence for a minute or more, then, without speaking another word, or even looking at me squarely in the face again, he moved deliberately away and I lost all trace of him in the crowd.

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CHAPTER XII

AN ASSIGNMENT

The next afternoon the city editor again said "Damn" and blushed.

"You needn't blush," I said to him wearily.

He glanced around in surprise.

"No?"

"No! I quite agree with you!"

It was late in the afternoon, but I made no apology for my tardiness, as I hung my hat on its nail and started toward my desk.

"Oh, you feel like saying it yourself, eh?" he questioned.

"I do."

He turned then and looked at me squarely. It was very seldom that he did such a thing, and as some time had elapsed since his last look he was likely able to detect a subtle change in my face. 187

"What's wrong with you?" he asked gruffly. "If you had *my* job, now, there'd be something to worry over! What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

He turned away, precipitately.

"Gee! Let me get out of here! That's what women always say when they're getting ready to cry."

"But I'm not going to cry!" I assured him, as he dashed through the doorway and I turned with some relief to my desk, for talking was somewhat of an effort.

I raised the top, whistling softly—one can nearly *always* manage a little sizzling whistle—then shrank back in terror from what I saw there.—Such chaos as must have been scattered about before sunrise on the morning of the First Day! Was it possible that I had been excited yesterday to the point of leaving the mucilage bottle unstopped? 188

I set to work, however, with a little sickening sense of shame, to making right the ravages that had taken place.

"A woman may fashion her balloon of anticipation out of silver tissue—but her parachute is *always* made of sack-cloth!" I groaned.

My desk was really in the wildest disorder. The tin top of the mucilage bottle had disappeared, the bottle had been overturned, its contents had been lavished upon the devoted head of a militant suffragette, and she was pinioned tightly to my blotting-pad.

"The elevator to Success is not running—take the stairs," grinned a framed motto above the desk.

"You take a—back seat!" I said, jumping up and turning the thing to the wall. "What do I care about success, if it's the sort of thing connected with typewriters, offices, copy paper and a pot of paste? I'm—I'm *des-qua-mat-ing!*"

Never before in my experience had the life of journalistic devotion looked quite so black as the ink that accompanies it. 189

"Mottoes about success ought to belong to men, anyhow!" I said again, looking up furiously at the drab back of the frame. "I'm not a man, nor cut out for man's work. I'm just a woman, and my head aches!"

I looked again at the militant suffragette, for it was a tragedy to me. I had spent a week of time and five honest dollars in the effort to get that photograph from a New York studio. She wasn't any common suffragette, but a strict head-liner.

"I'm not even a woman—I'm a child to let a little thing like this upset me," I was deciding a while later, when the door of the room opened again and some one entered.

"You're a big baby!" the city editor pronounced disgustedly, coming up to my desk and lowering his voice. "I knew you were going to cry."

"I—I think I may be coming down with typhoid," I said coldly, to keep from encouraging him in conversation. "And I've got a terrible lot of work to do before it gets quite dark. Really, an awful lot." 190

He dropped back a few paces, then circled nearer once more.

"Got anything—special?" he asked aimlessly.

His manner was so entirely inconsequential that I knew he had the most important thing for a month up his sleeve.

"Do you call this—mess anything special?" I asked. "I've got to do a general house-cleaning, and I wish I had a vacuum machine that would suck the whole business up into its mouth, swallow it and digest it—so I'd never see a scrap of it again."

Have I said before that he was a middle-aged man, named Hudson, and had scant red hair? It doesn't make any special difference about his looks, since I hadn't taken any rash vow to marry the first unfortunate man who crossed my path, but he looked so ludicrously insignificant and unlike an instrument of fate as he stood there, trying to break the news to me by degrees. 191

"Hate your ordinary work this afternoon?" he asked.

"I hate everything."

"Then, how would you like to change off a little?"

"I'd like to change off from breathing—if that would accommodate you any," I replied.

He made a "tut-tut" admonition with the tip of his tongue.

"You might not find blowing red-hot coals any pleasanter," he warned, "and angry little girls like you can't hope to go to heaven when they die!"

I rose, with a great effort after professional dignity.

"Mr. Hudson, evidently you have an assignment for me," I said. "Will you be so good as to let me know what it is?"

But even then he looked for a full thirty seconds into the luscious doors of a fruit stand across the street.

192

"I want *you* to get—that Consolidated Traction Company story for me," he then declared.

I jumped back as I had never jumped but once in my life before—the time when Aunt Patricia announced that she was going to leave James Christie's love-letters to me.

"You were at that dance last night!" I cried out accusingly, then realizing the absurdity of this I began stammering. "I mean, that I'm a special feature writer!" I kept on before he had had time to send me more than a demon's grin of comprehension.

"You are and this story is devilish special," he returned. "I want you to get it."

His tone, which all of a sudden was the boiled-down essence of business, sent me in a tremor over toward the nail where my hat hung. It was getting dark and I remembered then that I had heard fragments of telephonic conversation earlier in the evening anent "catching him there about seven."

"Well?"

193

He looked at me—with almost a human expression.

"I wasn't at the ball last night—but grapevines have been rustling, I admit," he said. "I hate like the very devil to ask you to do it, if you want to know the truth, but there's no other way out. I hope you believe me."

"A city editor doesn't have to be believed, but has to be obeyed," I responded, rising again from my chair where I had dropped to lock my desk. "Now, what is it I must do?"

"Well, I have a hunch that you will succeed where Clemons and Bolton and Reade have failed," he said. "And the foolish way the fellow acts makes it necessary for us to use all haste and strategy!"

"The fellow?"

"Maitland Tait. A day or two ago it was understood that he might remain in this town for several days longer—then to-day comes the news that he's straining every nerve to get away to-morrow!"

194

"Oh, to-morrow!"

"It appears that all the smoke in Pittsburgh is curling up into question marks to find out when he's coming back—"

"He's so important?"

"Exactly! But to-night he's going to hold a final conference at Loomis, and you can catch him before time for this if you'll go right on now."

"Very well," I answered, feeling myself in profound hypnosis.

"And, say! You'll have to hurry," he said, pressing the advantage my quiet demeanor offered. "Here! Take this hunk o' copy paper and hike!"

I accepted the proffered paper, still hypnotized, then when I had reached the door I stopped.

"Understand, Mr. Hudson, I'm doing this because you have assigned it to me!" I said with a cutting severity. "Please let that be perfectly plain! I shouldn't go a step toward Loomis—not even if it were a matter of life and death—if it were *not* a matter of urgent business!"

195

He looked at me blankly for a moment, then grinned. Afterward I realized that he knew this declaration was being made to my own inner consciousness, and not to him.

"Don't ask him for a photograph—for God's sake!" he called after me, from the head of the steps. "Remember—you're going out there on the *Herald's* account and the *Herald* doesn't need his picture, because it happens that we've already got a dandy one of him!"

I turned back fiercely.

"I hadn't *dreamed* of asking him for his photograph!" I fired. "I hope I have some vestige of reasoning power left!"

At the corner a car to Loomis was passing, and once inside I inspected every passenger in the deadly fear of seeing some one whom I knew. There was no one there, however, who could later be placed on the witness-stand against me, so I sat down and watched the town outside speeding

by—first the busy up-town portion, then the heavy wholesale district, with its barrels tumbling out of wagon ends and its mingled odor of fruit, vinegar and molasses, combined with soap and tanned hides. After this the river was crossed, we sped through a suburban settlement, out into the open country, then nearer and nearer and nearer.

196

All the time I sat like one paralyzed. I hated intensely the thought of going out there, but the very speed of the car seemed to furnish excuse enough for me not to get off! I didn't have will power enough to push the bell, so when the greasy terminal of the line was reached I rose quietly and left the car along with a number of men in overalls and a bevy of tired dejected-looking women.

"They ought to call it 'Gloom-is,'" I muttered, as I alighted at the little wooden station, where one small, yellow incandescent light showed you just how dark and desolate the place was. "And these people live here!—I'll never say a word against West Clydemont Place again as long as I live!"

197

Without seeming to notice the gloom, the people who had come out on the car with me dispersed in different directions, two or three of the men making first for the shadow of a big brick building which stood towering blackly a little distance up from the car tracks. I followed after them, then stopped before a lighted door at this building while they disappeared into a giant round-house farther back. The whirl of machinery was steady and monotonous, and it served to drown out the noise my heart was making, for I was legitimately frightened, even in my reportorial capacity, as well as being embarrassed and ashamed, independent of the *Herald*. It was a most unpleasant moment.

"This must be the office!"

The big door was slightly ajar, so I entered, rapping with unsteady knuckles a moment later against the forbidding panels of another door marked "Private."

"Well?"

"Well" is only a tolerant word at best—never encouraging—and now it sounded very much like "Go to the devil!"

198

"I don't give a rap if he *is* the Vice-President and General Manager of the Consolidated Traction Company," I muttered, the capital letters of his position and big corporation, however, pelting like giant hailstones against my courage. "I'm Special Feature Writer for *The Oldburgh Herald!*"

"If you've got any business with me open that door and come in!" was the further invitation I received. "If you haven't, go on off!"

The invitation wasn't exactly pressing in its tone, but I managed to nerve myself up to accepting it.

"But I have got some—business with you!" I gasped, as I opened the door.

Mr. Tait turned around from his desk—a worse-looking desk by far than the one I had left at the *Herald* office.

"Good lord—that is, I mean to say, *dear* me!" he muttered, as he wheeled and saw me. "Miss Christie!"

199



"This must be the office"

"Are you so surprised—then?"

"Surprised? Of course, a little, but—no-o, not so much either, when you come to think of it!"

The room was bare and barn-like, with a couple of shining desks, and half a dozen chairs. A calendar, showing a red-gowned lady, who in turn was showing her knees, hung against the opposite wall. Mr. Tait drew up one of the chairs.

"Thank you—though I haven't a minute to stay!"

I stammered a little, then sat down and scrambled about in my bag for a small fan I always carried.

"A minute?"

"Not long, really—for it's getting late, you see!"

My fingers were twitching nervously with the fan, trying to stuff it back into the bag and hide that miserable copy paper which had sprung out of its lair like a "jack-in-the-box" at the opening of the clasp. 200

He smiled—so silently and persistently that I was constrained to look up and catch it. He had seemed not to observe the copy paper.

"If you're in such a hurry your '*business*' must be urgent," he said, and his tone was full of satire.

"It is, but—"

I looked at him again, then hesitated, my voice breaking suddenly. Somehow, I felt that I was a thousand miles away from that magic spot on the Nile where the evening before had placed me. He looked so different!

"You needn't rub it in on me!" I flashed back at him.

His chair was tilted slightly against the desk, and he sat there observing me impersonally as if I were a wasp pinned on a cardboard. He was looking aloof and keenly aristocratic—as he was at the entrance of the conservatory the evening before.

"Rub it in on you?" 201

"I mean that I didn't want to come out here to-night!"

My face was growing hot, and try as I would to keep my eyes dry and professional-looking something sprang up and glittered so bewilderingly that as I turned away toward the lady on the calendar, she looked like a dozen ladies—all of them doing the hesitation waltz.

He straightened up in his chair, relieving that impertinent tilt.

"Oh,—you didn't want to come?"

"Of course not!"

I blinked decisively—and the red-gowned one faded back to her normal number, but my eyelids were heavy and wet still.

"But—but—"

"Please don't think that I came out here to-night because I wanted to see you, Mr. Tait!" I was starting to explain, when he interrupted me, the satire quite gone.

"But, after all, what else was there to do?" he asked, with surprising gentleness. 202

"What else?"

"Yes. Certainly it was *your* next move,—Grace!"

My heart out-did the machinery in the round-house in the way of making a hubbub at that instant, but he seemed not to hear.

"I mean to say—I—I expected to hear from you in some manner to-day. That is, I *hoped* to hear."

I gave a hysterical laugh.

"But you didn't expect me to board a trolley-car and run you down after night in your own den—surely?" I demanded.

He half rose from his chair, hushing my mocking word with a gesture. His manner was chivalrously protecting.

"You shan't talk that way about yourself!" he said insistently. "Whatever you have chosen to do is—is—all right!"

I felt bewildered.

"I just wanted to let you know—" I began, when he stopped me again, this time with an air of 203

finality.

"Please don't waste this *dear* little hour in explaining!" he begged. "I want you to know—to feel absolutely that nothing you might ever do could be misunderstood by me! I feel now that I *know* you—your impulsive, headstrong ways—"

"'Heart-strong,' Aunt Patricia used to say," I modified softly.

He nodded.

"Of course—'heart-strong!' I understand you! I understand why you refrained from telling me of your engagement, even."

My eyes dropped.

"I didn't—know then."

"You didn't know how I felt—what an unhappy complication you were stirring up."

There was a tense little silence, then he spoke again.

"If you are not in love with your fiancé—never have been in love with him—why do you maintain the relationship?" he asked, in as careful and businesslike a manner as if he were inquiring the price of pig-iron. 204

"Because—because that's the way we do things down here in this state," I answered. "What we *never* have done before, we have a hard time starting—and mother idolizes him!"

He smiled—his own particular brand of smile—for the first time.

"Little—goose!" he said.

"Then—last night, when you pretended that you were going straight away—"

"I *am* going away," he broke in with considerable dignity. "That is, I have my plans laid that way now."

"Plans?"

"Yes. It's true that my resolution to get away from this town was born rather precipitately last night; however, I have been able to make my plans coincide."

"Oh!" I began with a foolish little quiver in my voice, then collected myself. "I'm glad that you could arrange your affairs so satisfactorily." 205

He looked across at me, his mouth grim.

"Why should I stay?" he demanded. "To-night will see the finishing up of the business which brought me to Oldburgh!"

Then, and not until then, I'm afraid, did I really recall the face of my city editor—and the fact that he had sent me out to obtain an interview, not a proposal.

"Your business with the Macdermott Realty Company?" I inquired.

Maitland Tait looked at me with an amused smile.

"What do you know about that?" he asked.

"Nothing except what all the world knows!"

I managed to inject some hurt feeling into my voice, as if I had a right to know more, which in truth I felt.

"And how much does the world know?"

"Merely that you've either planned to shut down this plant here and move the whole business to Birmingham, or you've bought up acres and acres more of Oldburgh's suburbs and will make this spot so important and permanent that the company's grandchildren will have to call it home." 206

"But you—*you* don't know which I've done, eh?"

I shook my head.

"Then shall I tell you? Are you interested?"

"I'm certainly interested in knowing whether or not you'll—ever come back to Oldburgh—but I don't want you to tell *me* anything you'd rather I shouldn't know."

"I believe I want to tell you," he replied, his face softening humorously. "We have bought acres and acres more of Oldburgh's suburbs, and we're going to have quite a little city out here!"

"There's room for improvement," I observed, looking out through the window into the greasy darkness.

"There is and I'm going to see to it that the improvement's made! There will be model cottages here in place of those miserable hovels that I'm glad you can't see from here to-night—and each 207

cottage will have its garden spot—"

"That's good!" I approved. "I love gardens."

"Wait until you see some English ones I have seen," he said patriotically.

"I shall—then pattern my own by them! But—these Loomis plans?"

"Model cottages, with gardens—then a schoolhouse, with well-kept grounds—a club-room for men—"

"And a *sewing* circle for their wives," I added contemptuously.

He looked taken aback.

"Don't you like that?" he asked anxiously. "Why shouldn't they sew?"

"But why should they—just because they're women?" I asked in answer, and after a moment he began to see light.

"Of course if you prefer having them write novels, model in clay and illumine parchments we'll add those departments," he declared, with a generous air. "We're determined to have everything that an altruistic age has thrust upon the manufacturer to reduce his net income." 208

"And—occasionally—*you'll* be coming back to Oldburgh to see that the gardens grow silver bells and cockle shells and pretty maids all in a row?" I suggested, but after a momentary smile his face sobered.

"I don't know! There are things—in England—that complicate any arrangements, I mean *business* arrangements, I might wish to make just now."

"And Loomis will have to get along without you?"

I had put the question idly, with no ulterior motive in the world, but he leaned forward until the arm of his revolving chair scraped against my chair.

"Loomis *can* get along without me," he said, in a low tone, "and therefore must—but if I should find that I am needed—*wanted* here in Oldburgh—"

The shriek of the city-bound trolley-car broke in at that instant upon the quiet of the room, interrupting his slow tense words; and I sprang up and crossed to the window, for I felt suddenly a wild distaste to having Maitland Tait say important things to me then and there! Something in me demanded the most beautiful setting the world could afford for what he was going to say! 209

"I ought—I ought to catch that car!"

He followed me, his face gravely wondering.

"My motor is here. I'll take you back to town," he said, looking over my shoulder into the noisy, dimly-lit scene.

"But—weren't you going to be busy out here this evening?"

"Yes—later. I'll go with you, then return to a meeting I have here."

He rang the bell beside his desk and a moment later the face of Collins appeared in the doorway. Outside the limousine was breathing softly.

I don't remember what we talked about going in to town, or whether we talked at all or not; but when the machine slowed up at the *Herald* building and Maitland Tait helped me out, there was the same light shining from his eyes that shone there the night before—the light that made the glint of the silver oars on Cleopatra's Nile barge turn pale—and the radiance half blinded me. 210

"Grace, you don't want me to say anything to-night—I can see that," he said. "And you are right—if you are still bound to that other man! I can say nothing until I know you are free—"

He whispered the words, our hands meeting warmly.

"But, if you are going away!—You'll come and say good-by?"

"If it's to say good-by there'll be no use coming," he answered. "You *know* how I feel!"

"But we must say good-by!" I plead.

He leaned forward then, as he made a motion to step back into the car. His eyes were passionate.

"What matters where good-by is said—if we can do nothing but say it?" he demanded. "It's *your* next move, Grace." 211

When a tempest in a teapot goes out at the spout it is always disappointing to spectators!

One naturally expects the vessel to burst—or the lid to fly off, at least—and when neither takes place one experiences a little collapsed feeling of disappointment.

The barest thought of the pain I was going to inflict upon Guilford Blake when I broke my lifelong engagement to him had been sending shivers up and down my backbone ever since four o'clock on the afternoon of Mrs. Hiram Walker's reception—*then*, when I turned away from Maitland Tait's motor-car the night I went to Loomis on urgent business, and came face to face with my betrothed standing in the shadow of the office door waiting for me—the unexpected happened!

212

Mr. Blake broke his engagement with me!

"Grace, you amaze me!" he said.

He said it so quietly, with so icy an air of disapproval that I looked up quickly to see what the trouble was. Then I observed that he had told the truth. I hadn't crushed, wounded, nor annihilated him. I had simply amazed him.

"Oh, Guilford! I didn't know you were here!"

"I suppose not."

"But, how does it happen—?"

He motioned me to silence.

"Have the goodness to let me ask the questions," he suggested.

"Oh, certainly!"

"Will you, first of all, tell me what this means?" was the opening query, but before I could reply he went on: "Not that *I* have any right to pry into your affairs, understand!"

"Guilford!"

213

"It's true! My right to question you has ceased to exist!"

"You mean that you have washed your hands of me?" I gasped. After all, it was most unusual for Guilford and me to be talking to each other like this. I was bewildered by the novelty of it.

He caught the sound of the gasp and interpreted it as a plea for quarter. It settled him in his determination.

"I must," he declared.

"By all means—if that's the way you feel about it," I said courteously, as if granting a request.

He looked down at me, in a manner that said: "It hurts me more than it does you, my child."

"I've endured—things from you before this, Grace," he reminded me, "But to-night—why, this out-Herods-Herod!"

Now, if he had looked hurt—cruelly wounded or deeply shocked—I'd have been penitent enough to behave decently to him. But he didn't. He was simply angry. He looked like the giant when he was searching around for Jack and saying: "Fee! Faw! Fum! I smell the blood of an Englishman!"

214

"But what have I done?" I demanded indignantly. "Mayn't a man come to see me, and—"

"Certainly he may!"

"And mayn't I—"

"And you may go to see him, too—if you like!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—I mean," he answered, stammering a little with wrath, "of course *you* may do such things—Grace Christie may—but my future wife may not."

For a moment I had a blinded angry paralysis descend upon me. I had a great desire to do something to relieve the situation, but I didn't know what to do—rather as you feel sometimes at the breakfast table when your morning grapefruit hits you squarely in the eye.

"Suppose you try to calm yourself a little and tell me just what the trouble is," I said, struggling after calmness for my own individual use.

215

He took off his hat and mopped his brow.

"Your mother suspected last night that something had gone wrong with you at that dance," he began explaining, the flash of the street light at the corner showing that he had gone quite pale.

"Well?"

"She said that you came in looking wild-eyed and desperate."

"I am not willing to admit that," I said with dignity.

"And, then she knew you didn't sleep!" he kept on. "All day she has been feeling that something was amiss with you."

"I see! And when I didn't show up to-night at dinner—"

"She called the office—naturally."

"Naturally!" I encouraged.

"And the fool who answered the telephone consoled her by telling her that you had—gone—out—to—*Loomis*!"

He paused dramatically, but I failed to applaud.

"Well, what next?" I inquired casually.

216

He drew back.

"Then you don't deny it?"

I gave a little laugh.

"Why should I attempt to deny it?" I asked. "Haven't you just caught me in the act of coming back in Mr. Tait's car?"

"I have!" he answered in gloating triumph, "that is, I have caught you leaving his car—while he made love to you at the curb! This, however, doesn't necessarily confirm the *Loomis* rumor!"

He waited for me to explain further, but I simply bowed my head in acquiescence.

"Yes," I said serenely. "He was making love to me."

"And you acknowledge this, too?"

I made a gesture of impatience.

"I acknowledge everything, Guilford!—That you and I have been the victims of heredity, first of all, and—"

He drew back stiffly.

"Victims? I beg pardon?"

217

"I mean in this engagement of ours—that we had nothing to do with!"

"But I assure you that I have never looked upon myself in the light of a victim!" he said proudly. "And—although I know that it will not interest you especially—I wish to add that I have never given a serious thought to any other woman in my life."

"Yet you have never been in love with me!" I challenged.

He hesitated.

"I have always felt very close to you," he endeavored to explain. "We have so many things in common—there is, of course, a peculiar congeniality—"

"Congeniality?"

It struck me that the only point of congeniality between us was that we were both Caucasians, but I didn't say it.

"Our parents were friends long before we were born! This, of itself, certainly must bring in its wake a degree of mutual affection," he explained, and as the words "mutual affection" came unfeelingly from his lips I suddenly felt a thousand years further advanced in wisdom than he.

218

"But real love may be—is, I'm sure—a vastly different thing from the regard we've had for each other," I ventured, trying not to make a display of my superiority in learning, but he interrupted me contemptuously.

"Real love! What could you possibly know about that?" he asked chillingly. "You, who are ready to flirt with any stray foreigner who chances to stop over in this city for a week! But for me—why, I have never glanced at another woman! I have always understood my good fortune in being affianced to the one woman in the whole country round who was best fitted to bear the honored name which has descended to me."

When he said this I began to feel sorry for him. I was not sorry for his disappointment, you understand, but for his view-point. "I was never fitted for it, Guilford!" I said humbly. "It's true I come of the same sort of stock that produced you—but I am awkwardly grafted on my family tree! At heart I am a barbarian."

219

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—the things you love most I simply forget about."

"I think you do!" he coincided heartily. "You have certainly forgotten all about ordinary propriety to-night."

At this I waxed furious again.

"How I hate that word propriety!" I said. "And there's another one—a companion word which I never mean to use until I'm past sixty! It's *Platonic*!—Those two words remind me of tarpaulins in a smuggler's boat because you can hide so much underneath them!"

"I'm not speaking of hiding things," he fired back, as angry as I was. "And, if you want to know the truth, I rather admire your honesty in not trying to pretend that your flirtation with this Englishman *is* Platonic!—Yet that certainly doesn't throw any more agreeable light upon this happening to-night.—You *did* go to Loomis!"

220

I could scarcely keep from laughing at this, for his anger seemed to be centered in one spot—like an alderman's avoirdupois! He was thinking far less of losing me than of the indelicacy of my going to Loomis.

"Yes," I answered, trying to make my words inconsequential. "Old man Hudson sent me!"

His hat, which he had held deferentially in his hand all this time, suddenly fluttered to the ground.

"What!"

"Didn't you and mother *know* that?" I asked.

"That—that it was a business proposition?" he panted.

"Certainly—or I should never have gone! How little you and mother know about me, after all, Guilford."

He looked crestfallen for a moment, then his face brightened once more into angry triumph.

221

"But I saw him making love to you!" he summed up hastily, as an afterthought.

"Yes—you did," I assured him exultantly.

"And you met him for the first time—let me see? What day was it?"

I ignored the sarcasm.

"Tuesday," I answered. "At four o'clock in the afternoon."

"And not a soul in this town knows a thing about him!"

"Except myself," I protested. "I know a great deal about him."

"Then, do you happen to know—I heard it from a fellow in Pittsburgh who has followed his meteoric career as captain of industry—do *you* happen to know that he makes no secret of having left England because he was so handicapped by disadvantages of birth?"

I hesitated just a moment—not in doubt as to what I should say, but as to how I should say it.

"That's all right, Guilford," I answered complacently. "If his ancestors all looked like 'gentlemen of the jury' it doesn't lessen his own dignity and grandeur."

222

Now, if you've never been in a circuit court room you can't appreciate the above simile, but Guilford was a lawyer.

He looked at me in a dazed fashion for an instant.

"Grace, you don't feel ill—nor anything—do you?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh, no!"

"But I can't believe that you're exactly right in your mind!"

"Well—maybe—"

"I can't believe that to-morrow morning will actually dawn and find us asunder," he kept on quickly. "It must be some sort of fantastic dream."

"It will seem very—queer, at first, Guilford," I confessed, with a preliminary shrinking at the thought of facing mother.

"Queer's no word to use in connection with it," he answered crossly, then I heard heavy footsteps in the corridor above, and I took a quick step toward him.

223

"I must go up-stairs," I whispered. "Old man Hudson is making night hideous, I know!—But all this is really true, Guilford! And—and you must wear *this* in your vest pocket now!"

I slipped the scarab ring into his hand.

"You are determined?" he asked dully.

"I am—awakened," I replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you are not really in love with me—never have been in love with me, and never could be except upon certain occasions when I was dreadfully dressed-up—where there were red roses and the sound of violin music."

"Grace, you are—unkind," he said, with a groping look on his face. "I confess that I don't in the least understand you!"

"Then how lucky we are!" I exclaimed. "So many people don't find this out until after they've got their house all furnished! We're going to be friends always, Guilford."

224

Then, without waiting for him to say more I turned away and ran breathlessly up the steps into the office.

The brilliant light in the city news room met me squarely as I opened the door. I blinked a little—then raised my left hand and examined it closely. It looked—*awful!* I had worn that same ring ever since I was seventeen years old—and I felt as I might feel if I'd just had my hair cut off or suffered some other unprecedented loss.

The city editor looked up from his desk.

"Well?" he inquired. "Have you got it?"

I was still gazing at that left hand.

"No," I answered stupidly. "It's *gone!*"

He jumped to his feet.

"Here!" he commanded sharply. "Sit down here!"

I sat down, letting my bag slide to the floor.

"You don't feel sick—do you?"

"No."

"You didn't fall off the street-car—did you?"

"No."

225

"You haven't happened to any sort of trouble—have you?"

"No."

The "No—No—No—" was in the monotonous tone a person says "Ninety-nine" when his lungs are being examined.

Mr. Hudson looked at me closely.

"Then—the story!" he said.

I blankly reached for my bag, opened it and took out the blank copy paper.

"Oh—damn—" he began, then swallowed.

This awakened me from my trance.

"But he *does!*" I exclaimed in triumph. He *is*—and he's *going to be!*"

"Here?" the editorial voice called out sharply and joyously. "Here in Oldburgh?"

My head bobbed a concise yes.

"Bigger and better than ever?" my questioner tormented.

"A thousand times! Happiness for everybody!—Where there's a family there'll also be a House that's a Home—"

226

The old fellow began scribbling.

"I reckon he means model cottages," he observed sourly. "They all make a great pretense of loving their neighbor as themselves in this day and time."

"Yes—even if it's a cottage it will certainly be a model one—and what more could one desire?" I asked, rambling again.

"Then—what else?"

"And—oh! Gardens! Gardens—gardens!"

He held up his hand.

"Wait—you go too darn fast!"

"I'm sorry! Maybe I have gone too fast!" I answered, as I settled back in my chair and my face reddened uncomfortably. "Maybe I have gone too fast!"

"You have! You confuse me—talking the way you do and looking the way you do! By rights I ought to make you write the story out yourself—but you don't look as if you could spell 'Unprecedented good fortune in the annals of Oldburgh's industrial career,' to-night!"

227

"I'm sure I couldn't," I admitted readily. "Please don't ask me to."

"Well—go on with your narrative. What else?"

"Acres and acres! Acres and *acres*!" I impressed upon him. "That's what I've always wanted! I love acres so much better than neighbors—don't you?"

He paused in his writing.

"Of course the Macdermott Realty Company did the stunt?" he asked, scratching his head with his pencil tip and leaving a little black mark along the field of redness. "We mustn't forget to mention each individual member of the firm.—And then—?"

"A schoolhouse," I remembered.

He glared.

"A schoolhouse?" he questioned. "What for?"

"For the children!" I answered, lowering my eyes. "Did you think there wouldn't be any children? How could there be a House that was a Home without them?"

228

"Oh, and this fellow, Tait, is going to see to it that they're educated, eh? They're going to have advantages that he didn't have—and all that sort of thing? Very praiseworthy, I'm sure!"

I sprang up from my chair.

"I'm going home, Mr. Hudson, please!" I begged. "There *is* something wrong with my head."

He smiled.

"It's different from any other woman's head I ever saw," he admitted half grudgingly. "It's *leve*!"

"But indeed you're mistaken!" I plead. "Right this minute I'm—I'm seeing things!"

Then, when I said this a gentle light stole over his face—such a light I'm sure that few people ever saw there—perhaps nobody ever had except Mrs. Hudson the day he proposed to her.

"Visions?" he asked kindly. "A House that's a Home—and *English* gardens."

"That's not fair!" I warned. "I really ought not to have gone out there to-night—and I don't know whether he'll want all this written up or not—for I didn't mention the *Herald's* name in our conversation, and—"

229

"Bosh!" he snapped. "Rot! And piffle! You had a right to go out there if I sent you—and of course he can't object to the public knowing *now*! Why, I expect any one of the reporters could have got as much out of him to-night as you did!"

"Do you really think so?" I asked, from the doorway. "Good night, Mr. Hudson. You can easily make two columns out of that, by drawing on your—past experience."

He waved me crossly away, without once looking up or saying "Thank you" and I caught a car home. Half an hour later, when the curve was turned into the full face of West Clydemont Place I still thought I was "seeing things." A big motor-car stood before our door, but my heart changed its tune when I got closer. It was not a limousine. It was a doctor's coupé. Mother had suffered a violent chill.

"Grace, I—have no words!" she moaned, as I came into the room.

230

CHAPTER XIV

THE SKIES FALL

Before morning words began coming to her—gradually. First she moaned, then muttered, then raged. The chill disappeared and fever came on. By daybreak, however, they had both been left with the things that were, and mother slipped into her kimono.

"Go bring me the morning paper," she condescended, after the passing of the creamery wagon announced that busy life was still going on.

I rushed out into the front yard. The tree-tops were misty with that white fog which looks as if darkness were trailing her nightrobe behind her; and already on the neighboring lawns the automatic sprinklers were caroming across the green as if they had St. Vitus' dance.

231

"On a day like this *nothing* is too good to be true!" I decided, as I picked up the paper and scurried back into the house.

"And got *your* name to it—Grace Chalmers Christie!" mother wailed in despair, as she opened the sheet and saw two columns, broken by a face that could do much more sensible things than "launch a thousand ships and burn the topless towers of Ilium."

"Let's—see," I suggested, peering over her shoulder and watching the words dancing up and down on either side of this face. I couldn't read anything, but I managed to catch an occasional "Macdermott" as it pranced along in front of an occasional "model cottage."

"Take it!—Burn it!" mother commanded, after she had read enough to realize that the thing was entirely too dull to prove interesting to any feminine creature.

She thrust it into my hand, and I took it into my bedroom, where I began a frenzied search for the scissors.

232

"I'd rather have you by yourself—away from all suggestions of Macdermotts and enlarged traction companies," I whispered, snipping the picture from the page and laying it caressingly in the drawer of the old-fashioned desk.

There it lay all morning—and I whispered to it and caressed it.

"A picture in a drawer is worth two on the wall," I said once, as I pushed it away quickly to keep mother from seeing it. But the fun of the secret was not at all times uppermost.

"You are so beautiful—so beautiful," I wailed, as I looked at it another time. "I almost wish you were not—so beautiful."

For you must know that no woman in love ever *enjoys* her man's good looks! She loves him for so many other things besides beauty that she feels this demand is a needless cruelty—adding to her torture and making her love him the more. The only male beauty she can ungrudgingly adore is that which she cradles in her arms—the miniature of the Big Good Looks which have lured her and tormented her!

233

Then—just for the sake of keeping away from this drawer—I did different things to pass away the morning. I said good-by to the picture, then went into the library and looked up a word in the dictionary. I looked at the picture again after that—to make sure that it was still there—then I decided to wash my hair. But I changed my mind, for I was afraid the water might drip on the picture and ruin it. I looked up a bodkin and some blue baby ribbon—and forgot to gear up the corset-cover whose eyelets were gaping hungrily before my eyes. While I was trying to remember what one usually does with a bodkin and blue ribbon I looked at the picture again—and, well, if you have ever been there you can understand; and if you haven't no words could ever explain.

Then the telephone in the hall! I tried to keep away from it as hard as they say a murderer tries to keep away from the scene of his crime.

234

"I won't call him until afternoon," I kept telling myself. "It would be perfectly outrageous. I'll call him from the office—just about dusk, and——"

Then I began seeing things again—houses and English gardens, with children and schoolhouses in the background, and a smile on the face of Pope Gregory, the Somethingth, when he saw the Union Jack and Old Glory flying in peace above this vision—until I came to the office in time for the one o'clock staff meeting.

The first thing I saw there was a note lying on my desk. It bore no post-mark, so I knew that it must have come by messenger.

"What can he have said?" I thought, catching it up and weighing it in my hands. "And I wonder why he sent it here to the *Herald* office, instead of out home—and why he addressed it to Miss G. C. Christie, as if it were a business communication instead of to Miss Grace Chalmers Christie, and why——"

I looked at it again. It was surely from him, for it was written on traction company paper. I was glad of this, for I can forgive a man for anything—if he doesn't use fancy note-paper with his monogram in the corner.

235

I weighed it, and turned it over several times, and found a vague "Habana" fragrance about it—before I ran a hairpin under the flap and opened it. It ran as follows:

"My dear Miss Christie—

"I have no doubt that you already know every man to be an Achilles—who welds a heel protector out of his egotism. Now, it happens that my most vulnerable spot is a distaste to being made a fool of; and to-day I can realize what a heavy coating of self-importance lay over this spot yesterday to blind me to your real motive.

"My apology for being such an easy-mark is that it was a case of mistaken identity. I want you to know that, as an actress, you are amazing! I firmly believed that an unusually fair and charming woman was doing me a great honor—but I awoke this morning from my trance to find that a clever newspaper reporter had outwitted me.

"I understand now why American Woman must be kept as a tormenting side-issue in a man's busy life. He can't afford to let her come to the front or she throws dust in his eyes.

236

"Of course the words I said to the vision of my own fancy and the promises I exacted, do not hold good with the reporter. I am leaving Oldburgh at noon to-day, and even if I were not, you

would not care to see me again, since I know nothing more that would serve as a front-page article for the *Herald*."

"Very sincerely yours,
"MAITLAND TAIT."

Now, do you know what happens when a woman receives such a letter as this—a letter that starts seismic disturbances? Well, first she blames her eyesight. She thinks she hasn't read the thing aright! Then she carries it off into some dark corner where she hopes she can see better, for the strong glare of day seems to make matters worse. If there's an attic near, so much the better!

But there was no available attic to the *Herald* office, so I walked into the society editor's private room and slammed the door. I had thrust the note into my blouse, so that I'd have a little breathing-spell while I was getting it out, and as I tugged with a contrary belt pin I breathed very hard and fast. 237

But the second reading disclosed few details that had not been sent over the wires at the first report. Likewise the third, fourth and fifth. After that I lost count, and when I regained consciousness there was a heavy knock at the door—a knock in the possessive case. I rose wearily and admitted the rightful owner.

"Say, Grace," she commenced excitedly, "the old man's asking for you—Captain Macauley! He wants you to come down to his den at once for an interview. How does it feel to be the biggest thing on the *Herald*—for a day?"

I put my hand up to my forehead.

"It feels like——"

She laughed.

"Then try to look like it," she suggested. "Why, you look positively seasick to-day."

I didn't stop to explain my bearing false witness, but dashed past her to the head of the stairs. Captain Macauley's office was on a lower floor, and by the time I had gone leisurely down the steps I had quieted my eyelids somewhat. 238

"Well, Grace—how about the illegitimate use of weapons?" the old man laughed, lifting his shaggy head from the front page of the day's *Herald*, as I entered. "Sit down! Sit down—I want to talk with you."

But for a moment he failed to talk. He looked me over quizzically, then turned to his desk and drew a yellow envelope from a pigeonhole. It was a telegram. I opened it wonderingly.

"Pauline Calhoun met with a serious motor-car accident yesterday and will be compelled to cancel her contract with you." I read. I looked at the old man.

"To go abroad this summer for the *Herald*?" I asked.

He nodded.

"We've *advertised* her going," he said mournfully. "And the transportation is here."

"She was to have sailed Saturday week?" I asked, wondering at the cunning machinery of my own brain, which could keep on working after it was cold and dead! Every inch of my body was paralyzed. 239

"On the *Luxuria*," he said cheerfully, as he saw my expression. "The *Luxuria*, mind you, young lady!"

"And to miss it? How tragic!" I kept on absently, wishing that the whole Cunard Line was at the bottom of the sea if he meant to keep me there chattering about it all day.

"But it's tragic for the *Herald*," he snapped. "Don't you see we're up against it? Here, every paper in the South is doing stunts like this—getting out special stuff with its individual brand—and Pauline Calhoun can deliver the goods."

"Not with her arm broken," I mused aloud.

He looked at me impatiently.

"The thing is, we've got to send *somebody* abroad next week—somebody whose leg is not broken!"

"Oh!"

"And Hudson and I have been discussing you. This job you roped in last night was more than we'd given you credit for, and—so—well, can't you speak?" 240

I couldn't speak, but I could laugh. I felt as if my fairy godmother had taken me to a moving-picture show—where one scene was from Dante's *Inferno* and the next one was from a novel by the Duchess.

"There'd be Italy——" Captain Macauley began, but I shrank back.

"Not Italy!" I begged. "I couldn't go to Italy now."

"Why?"

"Because you'd want me to write a lot of sentimental stuff from there—and I'm not sentimental—now."

He smiled.

"Italy is the land of lovers," he whispered, his eyes twinkling over some 1870 recollection. "You must be in love with *somebody* when you're in Italy—and you can no more hide it than you can hide nettle-rash."

"I don't want to go there," I said stiffly.

241



"Well, can't you speak?"

"Well, you wouldn't have to!" he answered readily. "This steamer ticket reads from New York to Liverpool."

"Liverpool?" I repeated, as blankly as if geography hadn't been my favorite book at school—to eat apples behind.

"And Hudson suggested, since you showed last night that you were keen on getting the news of the hour, that you'd likely succeed in a new line in England. We've been surfeited on Westminster Abbey and the lakes, so we want *news!* Coal strikes and suffragettes—and other curses!"

"News?"

"Instead of mooning around Hampstead Heath listening to the newest scandal about George Romney and his lady friend, stay strictly in the twentieth century and get in line with the militants. Describe how they address crowds from cart-tails."

"I see," I said slowly.

But in my attempts to see I think I must have passed my left hand across my forehead. At all events, he caught sight of its ringless state.

242

"Grace!" he exclaimed, catching my fingers roughly and scrutinizing the little pallid circle left by the ring's long contact—sometimes the healthiest, sometimes the deadliest pallor that female flesh is heir to! "Does this mean that you've broken off with Guilford Blake?"

"Yes."

His face grew grave.

"Then, child, I beg your pardon for talking so glibly about your going away!—I didn't know."

"But it isn't that—it's not that I'm worrying over now," I explained forlornly. "And Guilford's not hurt! Please don't waste sympathy on him. He'll be glad, when the first shock gets over, for I've tormented him unmercifully."

"Then—what is it?" he asked, very gently.

I drew away my hand.

"It's—something *else!* And please don't change your mind about sending me abroad! I'd like very much to go away from here. Anywhere except to Italy."

243

He reached over and patted my bereft hand affectionately.

"So the something else is the same sort of something, after all?"

"Perhaps."

"Then run along and begin getting ready," he said. "Get clothes in your head—and salt-sprayed decks on moonlight nights, and wild adventures."

I smiled.

"That's right! Smile! I *can't* send out a representative with a broken leg—and I'd prefer not sending out one with a broken heart."

I turned away then, struggling fiercely with something in my throat, but just for an instant.

"Broken heart!" I repeated scornfully. "It's not that bad. You mustn't think I'm such a fool."

"Well," he said briskly, "whatever it is, cut it out! And, believe me, my dear, a steamer trunk is the best possible grave for unrequited love."

244

CHAPTER XV

THE JOURNEY

Personally, I am of such an impatient disposition that I can't bear to read a chapter in a book which begins: "Meanwhile——" Life is too short for meanwhiles! But, since the Oldburgh epoch of my career has passed, and the brilliant new epoch has a sea-voyage before it—and crossing the ocean is distinctly a "meanwhile" occupation—I have decided to mark time by taking extracts from my green leather voyage book, with the solid gold clasp and the pencil that won't write. (The city editor gave me the book.)

The first entry was made at the breakfast table in an unnecessarily smart New York hotel. That's one bad feature about having a newspaper pay your traveling expenses! You can't have the pleasure of indulging the vagabondage of your nature—as you can when you're traveling on your hook. The lonely little entry says:

245

"*Hate* New York! Always feel countrified and unpopular here!"

But the next one was much better. It reads:

"*Love* the sea, whose principal charm is the sky above it! The one acceptable fact about orthodox Heaven is that it's up in the sky. You couldn't endure it if it were in any closer quarters."

Yet between New York and Heaven there lay several unappreciated days—days when I sat for long hours facing strange faces and hearing a jumbled jargon about "barth" hours, deck chairs and miscarried roses. By the way, a strange trick of fate had filled my own bare little stateroom with flowers. I say a trick of fate, because some of them were for Pauline Calhoun, whose New York friends had heard of her proposed journey, but not of her accident, and some of them were addressed to me. I could understand the Pauline blossoms, but those directed to Miss Grace Christie were mystifying—very. But I accepted them with hearty thanks, and the time I spent wondering over them kept me from grieving over the fact that the Statue of Liberty was the only person on the horizon whose face I had ever seen before; and they kept me feeling like a prima donna for half a week.

246

"Henry Walker couldn't have sent them," I pondered the first day, as the big, big box was deposited inside my door. "He's not such a close friend, even though he is the Hiram Walkers' son—and then, New York law students never have any money left over for orchids."

I enumerated all the other people I happened to know in New York at that time, all of them there for the purpose of "studying" something, and not for the purpose of buying vast quantities of the highest-priced flower blown, and the mystery only loomed larger.

Still, the question could not keep me entirely occupied between meals, and on the very day we sailed, before we had got into the space where the union of the sea and sky seem to shut out all pettiness, I got to feeling very sorry for myself. Thinking to get rid of this by mingling with humanity, I went down into the lounge, where I was amazed to find dozens of other women sitting around feeling sorry for themselves. It was not an inspiring sight, so after a vain attempt to read, I curled my arms round a sofa cushion in the corner of the big room and turned my face away from the world in general. The next communication I received was rather unexpected. I heard a brisk voice, close beside me exclaim:

247

"My word! A great big girl like you crying!"

It was an English voice—a woman's, or rather a girl's, and as I braced up indignantly I met the blue-gray eyes of a fresh-faced young Amazon bent toward my corner sympathetically.

"I'm not crying," I denied.

She turned directly toward me then, and I saw a surprised smile come over her face.

"Oh, *you!* No—I supposed that you were ill; but the little kid over there——"

248

I saw then that there was a tiny girl tucked farther away into the corner, her shoulders heaving between the conflict of pride and grief.

"Cheer up, and I'll tell you a story," the English girl encouraged, and after a few minutes the small flushed face came out of its hiding-place.

"So you thought I was talking to *you?*"

She turned to me laughingly after the smaller bunch of loneliness had been soothed and sent away.

"I was—mistaken——"

"But I'm sure I should have offered to tell you a story—if I had supposed that it would do you any good," she continued.

"Almost anything—any sound of a human voice would do me good now," I answered desperately, and with that sky-rocket sort of spontaneity which you feel you can afford once or twice in a lifetime.

"You're alone?"

"Yes—and miserable."

Her blue eyes were very frank and friendly, and I immediately straightened up with a hope that we might discover some mutual interest nearer and dearer than the Boston Tea-Party.

249

That's one good thing about a seafaring life—the preliminaries that you are able to do without in making friends. If you meet a nice woman who discovers that her son went to Princeton with your father's friend's nephew you at once take it for granted that you may tell her many things about yourself that are not noted down in your passport.

"You're American—of course?" this English girl asked next.

I acquiesced patriotically, but not arrogantly.

"Yes—I'm American! My name's Grace Christie, and I'm a newspaper woman from—from——"

I hesitated, and she looked at me inquiringly.

"I didn't understand the name of the state?" she said.

"Because I haven't told you yet!" I laughed. "I remember other experiences in mentioning my native place to you English. You always say, 'Oh, the place where the negro minstrels come from!'"

250

She smiled, and her face brightened suddenly.

"The South! How nice! I *love* Americans!" she exclaimed, confiding the clause about her affection for my countrymen in a lowered voice, and looking around to make sure that no one heard.

Then, after this, it took her about half a minute to invite me out of my corner and to propose that I go and meet her father and mother.

"We'll find them in the library," she ventured, and we did.

"The South! How nice! We *love* Americans!" they both exclaimed, as we unearthed them a little while later in a corner of the reading-room. And before they had confided to me their affection for my countrymen they lowered their voices and glanced at their daughter to make sure that she was not listening. They made their observations in precisely the same tone and they looked precisely alike, except that the father had side-whiskers. They were both small and slight and very durably dressed.

251

"Miss Christie is a newspaper woman—traveling alone!"

The daughter, whom they addressed as "Hilda" made the announcement promptly, and her manner seemed to warn them that if they found this any just cause or impediment they were to speak now or else hereafter forever hold their peace.

"Indeed?" said the mother, looking over my clothes with a questioning air, which, however, did not disapprove. "Indeed?"

"My word!" said the father, also taking stock of me, but his glance got no further than my homesick face. "My *word!*"

But you are not to suppose from the tone that anything had gone seriously wrong with his word. He said it in a gently searching way, as an old grandfather, seeking about blindly on the mantlepiece might say, "My spectacles!"

So realistic was the impression of his peering around mildly in search of something that I almost

252

jumped up from my chair to see if I could, by mistake, be sitting on his word.

"Isn't she young?"

His twinkling little gray eyes sought his wife's as if for corroboration, and she nodded vigorously.

"Indeed, yes, Herbert! But they shed their pinafores long before our girls do, remember!"

Then he turned to his daughter.

"My dear, the American women *are* so capable!" he said, and she threw him a smile which would have been regarded as impertinent—on English soil.

"Well, I'm sure I've no objections to being an American woman myself," she said.

"And you do not mind the loneliness of the trip you're taking?" the mother put in hastily, as if to cover her daughter's remark.

"I didn't—until to-day."

"But we must see to it now that you're not too lonely," she hastened to assure me. "Where have they put you in the dining-room, my dear?"

253

I mentioned my table's location.

"Oh, but we'll get the steward to change you at once!" they chorused, when it had been pointed out to them that my position in the salon was isolated and far away from the music of the orchestra.

"We're just next the captain's table," Hilda explained. "We happened to know him and——"

"And it's inspiring to watch the liberties he takes with the menu," the father said. "I'd best write down our number, though I'll see the steward myself."

From his pocketbook he produced a card, scribbling their table number upon the back and handing it to me.

I took it and glanced at the legend the face of it bore, first of all, for figures are just figures, even though they do radiate out from the captain's table.

"Mr. Herbert Montgomery, Bannerley Hall, Bannerley, Lancashire," was the way it read.

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"Lancashire?" I asked, looking up so quickly that Hilda mistook my emotion for dismay.

"Yes, we live in Lancashire, but——"

"But we're going on to London first," Mrs. Montgomery assured me.

"We'll see to it that you're put down, safe and sound, at Charing Cross," Mr. Herbert Montgomery finished up.

I looked up again, this time in sheer bewilderment.

"Liverpool's in Lancashire," Hilda explained. "I thought perhaps you were afraid we would desert you as soon as we docked."

I laughed in some embarrassment.

"I'm sure I never before heard that Liverpool had any connection with Lancashire," I explained. "But I was thinking of—something else."

"Something else—how curious! Why, what else is Lancashire noted for in America, pray?"

They were all three looking at me in some excitement, for my eyes were betraying the palpitations I was experiencing.

255

"Do you—does it happen that you have ever heard of Colmere Abbey?" I asked.

They drew a deep breath, evidently relieved.

"Do we!" they chorused again, as they had a habit of doing, I learned, whenever they were surprised or amused. "Well, *rather!*"

"Surely you don't mean to tell me that it's your own home?" I demanded, wondering if coincidence had gone so far, but they shook their heads.

"No! Just next-door neighbors."

"Next-door neighbors to the place, my dear young lady," Mr. Montgomery modified, glancing at his wife rather reproachfully. "Not to the—owner of Colmere!"

But I scarcely heard him. I was trying to place an ancient memory in my mind.

"Bannerley Hall!"

"That's our place."

"But I'm trying to remember where I have heard of it," I explained. "Of course! They all

"They?—Who, my dear? Why Herbert—isn't this interesting?"

"Why, Washington Irving—and Lady Frances Webb—and Uncle James Christie."

Their questions and my half-dazed answers were tumbling over one another.

"James Christie—Grace Christie?" Mrs. Montgomery asked, connecting our names with a delighted opening of her eyes. "Why, my *dear!*"

"How fortunate I was!" observed Hilda. "I knew, though, from the moment I saw the back of your head that you were no ordinary American tourist!"

"They all 'rode over to Bannerley Hall—the day being fine!" I quoted, from one of the letters written by Lady Frances Webb.

"That was in my great-grandfather's time," Mr. Montgomery elucidated. "And James Christie was your—"

"Uncle—with several 'greats' between."

"He was even more famous in England than in his own country," Mrs. Montgomery threw in hastily, as she saw her husband's eyes twinkling—a sure sign, I afterward learned, that he was going to say something wicked. "He painted all the notable people of the age."

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"He made many pictures of the Lady Frances Webb," Mr. Montgomery succeeded in saying, after a while. "I don't know whether it's well known in America or not, but—there was—*talk!*"

"Herbert!"

He stiffened.

"It's true, my dear."

"We don't know whether it's true or not!" she contended.

"Well, it's tradition! I'm sure Miss Christie wouldn't want to come to England and not learn all the old legends she might."

Then, partly because I was bubbling over with excitement, and partly because I wished to ease Mrs. Montgomery's mind on the subject, I began telling them my story—from the day of Aunt Patricia's sudden whim, three days before her death, down to the packet of faded letters lying at that moment in the bottom of my steamer trunk.

258

"I thought perhaps the present owner of Colmere might let me burn them there!" I explained. "I have pictured her as a dear and somewhat lonely old dowager who would take a great deal of interest in this ancient affair."

The three looked at me intently for an instant, but not one of them laughed.

"And you're carrying them back to Colmere—instead of selling them!" Mrs. Montgomery finally uttered in a little awed voice, as I finished my story. "How extraordinary!"

"Very," said Hilda.

"Most un-American—if you'll not be offended with me for saying so, Miss Christie," Mr. Montgomery observed. Then he turned to his wife. "My dear, only *think* of Lord Erskine!" he said.

She shook her head.

"But I mustn't!" she answered, with a sad little smile. "I really couldn't think of Lord Erskine while listening to anything so pretty."

259

I caught at the name, curiously.

"Lord Erskine?"

"Yes—the present owner of the abbey."

"But—what a beautiful-sounding name! Lord Erskine!"

I looked at them encouragingly, but a hush seemed to have fallen over their audible enthusiasm. Mrs. Montgomery's lips presently primped themselves up into a signal for me to come closer to her side—where her husband might not hear her.

"Lord Erskine is, my dear—the most—notorious old man in *England!*" she pronounced—so terribly that "And may the Lord have mercy on his soul" naturally followed. Her verdict was final.

"But what has he done?" I started to inquire, the journalistic tendency for the moment uppermost, but her lips showed white lines of repression.

"He is never *mentioned!*" she warned briefly, and I felt constrained to wish that the same punishment could be applied to America's ancient sinners.

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"Oh, so bad as that?"

She leaned closer.

"My dear Miss Christie, it would be impossible—quite impossible—to enumerate the peccadillos of that wretched old creature!"

"Yet you women are always ready to attempt the impossible!" her husband interposed, after his noisy attempt at lighting a cigarette had failed to drown out our voices.

She looked up at him.

"Herbert, I don't understand you, I'm sure."

He laughed.

"Well, I don't understand you, either!" he replied. "For twenty years now I have noticed that when two or three women in our part of the country are gathered together the first thing they say to each other before the men have come into the room is that Lord Erskine's recent escapades are positively unmentionable—then they fly at each other's throats for the privilege of retailing them." 261

She continued to stare at him, steadily and with no especial unfriendliness in her gaze.

"And the men—over their wine?" she asked casually.

He squared his shoulders.

"That's a very different matter," he declared. "With us he is as honest and open a diversion as hunting! The first thing we say in greeting, if we meet a neighbor on the road is: 'What's the latest news from Lord Erskine?'"

Their eyes challenged each other humorously for another moment, when Hilda broke in.

"Don't you think we've given Miss Christie a fairly good idea that she mustn't expect to be invited down to Colmere Abbey—and that if she is invited, she mustn't go?" she inquired, with gentle sarcasm.

"But, before we get away from the subject—what of the Webb family?" I begged forlornly. "Is there no one living who might take an interest in the story of Lady Frances?" 262

I am sure my voice was as sad with disappointment as old Joe Jefferson's used to be when he'd plead: "Does *no one* know Rip Van Winkle?"

"Lord Erskine's mother was a Webb," Mrs. Montgomery explained.

"The one fact which can be stated about the old gentleman which need not be blushed for," her husband added. "In truth, he has always been vastly proud of his lineage."

"About all that he's ever had to be proud of! His own performances in social and family life have been—well, what I have outlined to you. I happened to know details of some earlier happenings, and all I can say is that my own attitude toward Lord Erskine is rather unchristian."

"But I believe Miss Christie was asking about the family history further back than the present lord," Hilda reminded them again, and her mother took the cue.

"Ah, yes! To be sure! It's the failing of later years, my dear, to wish to discuss one's own memories! But of course your interest lies in the traditions of the novelist." 263

"Her history has always held a peculiar interest for me," I replied, "first, naturally, on account of the connecting link—then on account of the—tragic complication—"

She nodded her head briskly.

"Yes—poor Lady Frances! She was not very happy, if the ancient reports be true."

"I judge not—from her letters."

"But her memory is held in great reverence by the educated people around in the country," she hastened to assure me. "And there is a lovely memorial tablet in the church—quite aside from the tomb! A literary club of London had it placed there!"

"And every birthday there are wreaths," Mr. Montgomery threw in, evidently hoping to make it up to me for the disheartening gossip of the present age; but my dreams were rapidly fading—and I saw my chances for having a bonfire on the library hearth at Colmere go up in something far more unsubstantial than smoke. 264

"Well, I'm sure we've told Miss Christie quite enough about our neighbors—for a first sitting," Hilda Montgomery broke in at this point, as she rose and made a reckless suggestion that we go out and walk a little while. "I don't wish to spend the whole afternoon talking about a villainous old Englishman!" she confided, when we were well out of ear-shot. "One might spend the time talking about 'Americans—don't you know?'"

"Americans?"

"Yes—charming, handsome, young Americans! You remember the first thing I told you was that I loved Americans?"

"Yes—and your father and mother said they did, too—when you weren't listening."

She nodded her blond head, in energetic delight.

"They are trying to pretend that it will be a difficult matter to win their consent—but it won't." 265

We steered our course around a group of people who were disputing, in Wabash tones, over a game of shuffleboard.

"Consent?" I repeated.

"His name is John McAdoo Carpenter—and he lives at South Bend, Indiana—did you ever hear of the place? Did you ever hear of him?"

She caught me by the arm and we walked precipitately over to the railing—out of the sound of the Wabash tones.

"If I don't talk to somebody before that sun goes down I'll jump right over this railing," she explained. "Here's his picture!"

I took the small blue leather case and looked at the honest, rather distinguished face it held.

"But why should your parents disapprove of *him*?" I asked in such genuine surprise that she gave me a smile which sealed forever our friendship.

"They don't—really! It's just that they like to torment me because he happened not to be born in either New York or Kentucky. An Englishman's knowledge of America's excellence extends no further than that." 266

Night was coming on—and the sea looked pretty vast and unfriendly. It was the lonesome hour, when any feminine thing far away from home has to wax either confidential or tearful. Hilda was determined to be confidential, and I let her have her say. I went down, after a while, and dressed for dinner—listlessly and without heart, but when I went into the dining-room a little later and found my place at the table next the captain's, the geniality of the family atmosphere I found there was vastly cheering.

Mrs. Montgomery was a rather magnificent little gray-haired lady in gray satin and diamonds, and her husband had made the evolution from the chrysalis state into that of the butterfly by donning his dress clothes and putting up a monocle in place of the comfortable reading glasses he had worn in the afternoon. Hilda was wholesome and sweet-looking but quite secondary to her parents, in a soft blue gown. 267

The subject under discussion when I arrived was evidently the points of superiority of one American locality over another and they took me into their confidence at once.

"I appeal to you, Miss Christie, as an American," Mr. Montgomery said, after the steward who had acted as my pilot was out of hearing. "Shouldn't you think now—if you didn't know the difference—*shouldn't* you think now that a 'South *Bender*' was a species of acrobat?"

Then, try as hard as I might to keep all physical signs of my mental infirmity from cropping out in my log-book, the second evening out found an entry like this showing itself—written almost entirely without effort on my part—like "spirit writing":

"To-night the orchestra is playing *The Rosary*, and I had to get away from all those people in the lounge!

"I have come down here—away from it, as I thought, but, no! Those same high, wailing notes that we heard that first day—*that first day*—are ringing in my ears this minute. 268

"How they sob—sob—sob! And over the hours they spent together! That's the foolish part of it! I am sobbing over the hours I *might* have spent with him—and didn't!

"Are like a string of pearls to me!"

"Bah! The hours I spent with him wouldn't make pearls enough for a stick-pin—much less a rosary!

"To me *Caro Mio Ben* is a much more sensible little love plaint! I wonder if *he* knows it? I wonder if he heard that girl singing in the parlor the night of the Kendalls' dance—and if it still rings—rings—rings in his mind every time he thinks of me? Or if he ever thinks of me at all?"

I have inserted this not so much to show you how very critical my case was, as to demonstrate how valuable a thing is diversion. Without Hilda and the elder Montgomerys I should no doubt have tried to emulate Lady Frances Webb in the feat of writing heart-throbs.

The third day's observation was a distinct improvement. 269

"The men on shipboard are rather better than the women—just as they are on dry land. True, there are some who have sold Chicago real estate, and are now bent upon spending the rest of their lives running over to Europe to criticize everything that they can not buy. Nothing is sacred to them—until after they have paid duty on it. They revere and caress their own Italian mantelpieces, their cases of majolica, and their collection of Wedgwood—when these are safely decorating their lake-shore homes—but what Europe keeps for herself they scorn.

"Bah! I don't see anything so swell about St. Mark's—nor St. Doge's either!" I heard one emit this morning. 'But, old man, you just ought to see the champagne glasses I bought last year in Venice. The governor dined with me the other night, and he said——' etc.

"Then, there's another sort of Philistine, who goes all over the Old World eating his lunch off places where men have suffered, died, or invented pendulums.

"That confounded Leaning Tower *does* feel like it's wiggling as you go up, but pshaw! it's perfectly safe! Why, I stayed on top long enough to eat three sandwiches and drink a bottle of that red ink you get for half a dollar in Florence!"

"This doesn't create much of a stir, however, because there's always one better.

270

"Nice little tower down there in Pisa—and you really have to have something like that to relieve your constitution of the pictorial strain in Florence—but you see, after you've eaten hard-boiled eggs on top of *Cheops*, climbing the Leaning Tower is not half so exciting as riding a sapling was when you were a boy!"

"And oh, speaking of hard-boiled eggs—have you ever been to Banff, Mr. Smith?" one of the women in the crowd speaks up. 'Yes, the scenery in the Canadian Rockies is all right, of course, but just to *think* of having your eggs perfectly hot and well done in the waters of Banff!"

"There are other women on board, however, whose thoughts are not on food. They are more amusing by far to watch than the innocent creatures who love Banff. They manage to stay well out of view by strong daylight, then come into the lounge at night, dressed in plumes and diamonds like Cinderella's stepsisters, and select the husbands of sea-sick wives to ask advice about focusing a kodak or going to Gibraltar to buy a mandarin coat!"

"But, as I have said, the men for the greater part are much more interesting than the women—still I have never aspired to a nautical flirtation, for a month after one is past you can't recall the principal's name. You do well if you can remember his nationality."

The entry broke off with this piece of sarcasm, which, after all, is actual truth. A friend of mine had such an experience. A month after a bitter parting on a moonlit deck one night she came face to face with the absent one in a church in Rome—and all she could stammer was: "Oh—you *Canadian!*"

271

The fourth day—after the last vestige of the gulls had been left behind—I began to grow impatient. The "meanwhile" aspect of life in general was beginning to press down.

"I wish mother had named me 'Patience,' for I love a joke!" I wrote frantically—with the same feeling of suffocation which caused Lady Frances Webb to rush out to the rose garden where the sun-dial stood, to keep from hearing the clock tick.

"To me, the inertia which a woman is supposed to exhibit is the hardest part of her whole earthly task! And I don't know what it's for, either, unless to prepare her for a future incarnation into a camel!"

"Yet, if you're a woman, you just must stay still and let your heart's desire slip through your fingers—even if you have to lock yourself up into your bedroom closet to accomplish it!"

272

And yet, even as I wrote, I wondered what I'd do when I should be back in America. Somehow, I didn't exactly fancy myself getting a ticket home from New York with stop-over privileges at Pittsburgh—where I could spend an exciting time looking up a city directory!

And so the remaining days of the voyage passed. The Montgomery family planned to have me go home with them, after a day in London, and declared that I could find as much interesting news to write home for the *Herald* from Lancashire as from any other portion of the United Kingdom, since one never knew where a fire would be started or a bomb discovered through the playful antics of the women who have changed the "clinging" sex into the *flinging* sex; and I had accepted fervently—when, on the trip from Liverpool down to London, these arrangements were abruptly upset.

We were a little late in landing, and rushed straight to the train, where a tea-basket, operated in the compartment which we had to ourselves, was giving me the assurance that surely, next to a hayloft on a rainy morning, a private compartment in a British train is the coziest spot on the face of the earth, when Mr. Montgomery suddenly dropped the sheet of newspaper he had been eagerly scanning.

273

"My *word!*" he said.

His exclamation was so insistent that I immediately felt in my pocket to see if I had his word, and his wife glanced up from the lamp which she was handling lovingly.

"Yes, Herbert?"

"But I say—Lord Erskine is dead!"

"Herbert!"

Her tone was accusing, but her husband nodded, with a pleased look of assurance.

"You may read it for yourself, I'm sure—if you don't believe me!"

He handed the paper over to her, and she received it gingerly, after looking to the tea-basket with a housewifely air, and placing the lamp quite to one side, out of harm's way. Then she

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turned to the article indicated, reading slowly, while her daughter looked over her shoulder.

"Why, he's *been* dead!"

She glanced up suddenly, toward me, with a shamefaced look.

"He was dead at the very time you were telling Grace all those atrocious things about him!" Hilda reminded her, smiling at the look of discomfiture which had crept over the kindly, wrinkled little face.

"Yes! It's—extraordinary!"

"And it makes us both feel—a little uncomfortable, eh?"

Her husband's tone was tormenting, but she turned on him seriously.

"I'm sure, Herbert, dear, you said quite as much as I did!" she declared, evidently finding relief in the knowledge. "Still—this news does rather make one—think."

The girl rattled the sheet of paper excitedly.

275

"I'm thinking!" she announced, her eyes wide. "I'm thinking of Colmere Abbey! What a chance for some rich decent American! Somebody that one could easily endure, you understand!"

"Hilda!"

She waved aside the reprimand.

"Grace understands me—and what I think of Americans," she answered quickly. "But, mother, this *is* a problem! What Englishman would buy the place—with its haunting tales—and monstrous value? Nobody would be rich enough except one of the millionaires who owns a dozen homes already. And the next-of-kin will inherit nothing along with the place to keep it up!"

"Hilda! This is neither respectful nor neighborly," her mother remonstrated again, then she turned to her husband. "Shall you write to the new Lord Erskine from London, Herbert?"

Her tone was one of foregone conclusion, conventional enough, but very kindly, and her husband nodded obediently.

276

"Oh, to be sure, my dear," he chirruped in a dutiful way. "I shall wire his lawyers immediately and ___"

"And ask for the pleasure of putting him up while he's in the country?"

"Certainly! Certainly!"

"It will be unpleasant—this period of mourning that we shall have to affect—for his sake," she went on, "but it is out of respect for the neighborly proprieties, after all."

Mrs. Montgomery was looking at us all in turn, in some little perplexity, when a sudden recollection came to me of how difficult it is sometimes to amalgamate guests—no matter how many rooms there are to one's house.

"And I'll defer my visit until later?" I suggested.

She instantly smiled across at me.

"Just a few days—if you don't mind, dear," she said. "I had planned so many delightful things for *your* stay—and I know that you wouldn't enjoy the period of mourning."

277

"Not so much as you would if you had known Lord Erskine!" her husband put in wickedly. "And I'm determined to mourn only the briefest time possible."

"Not an hour later than Saturday!" his wife promised generously—and a few hours afterward when they put me down at Charing Cross and sent me whirling away to a lady-like hotel in Bloomsbury, it was with spoken, written and pantomime directions as to which trains, and what-timed trains—and *how many* trains I was to take toward the end of the week to get to Bannerley.

In the meanwhile I knuckled down devotedly to London—and sent my deductions home across seas, in neatly typed packets, to *The Oldburgh Herald*.

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CHAPTER XVI

LONDON

What can't be appreciated can always be ridiculed—whether it's Old Masters, new waltzes, or a wife's Easter bonnet—and this is the reason we have always had such reams of journalistic "fun" at the expense of the broad English "a" and the narrow English view.

For my part, I consider that—next to the French in New Orleans—the English in England are the

golden-ruliest people to be found in profane history.

You'll find that they're "insular" only when they're traveling off their dear island—and it's homesickness, after all, which makes them so disagreeably arrogant.

To be sure, the Frenchman in New Orleans will, if you ask him for a word of direction toward the Old Absinthe House, take you into his private office, draw for you a diagram of the whole city, advise you at length not to go unescorted into the Market, then follow you to the door with the final warning: "And it would be well for you to observe a certain degree of caution, my dear young lady, for our city is filled with wickedness, and your eyes are—*pardon?*—most charming!" 279

This is delightful, of course, and by far the most romantic thing in the way of adventure America has to offer, but rambling around London presents a dearer and more home-like charm.

The Englishman who directs you to a church, or a university square, stops to say nothing about your eyes—much less would he mention the existence of good and evil—but he points out to you the tomb, or chained Bible, or famous man's pew you are seeking, then glides modestly away before you've had time to say: "It's awfully good of you to take all this trouble for a stranger!" 280

But the truth of the matter is that you don't in the least feel yourself a stranger in London, and you like your kindly Englishman so cordially that you secretly resolve to put a muzzle on your own particular cannon cracker the next Fourth of July.

The shilling guide-books speak of London as the "gray old grandmother of cities," meaning thereby to call attention to her upstart progeny across the seas, but to my mind the title of grandmother is much more applicable on account of the joyous surprises she has shut away in dark closets.

One of the main pleasures of a visit to any grandmother is the gift of treasure which she is likely to call forth mysteriously from some tightly-closed cupboard and place in your hands for your own exclusive possession—and certainly this old dingy city outgrannies granny when it comes to that.

In the dingiest little book-stall imaginable, lighted by a candle and tended by a ragged-cuffed gentleman with a passion for Keats, you may find the very edition of something that college professors in your native town are offering half a year's salary for! You buy it for five dollars—which seems much more insignificant when spoken of by the pound—then run out and hail the nearest cab, offering the chauffeur an additional shilling to get you out of the neighborhood in ten seconds! Your heart is thumping in guilty fear that the ragged-cuffed gentleman with the passion for Keats may discover his mistake and run after you to demand his treasure back! 281

You make a similar escape, a few hours later, with a Wedgwood tea-caddy, whose delicate color the pottery has never been able to duplicate—and with Sheffield plate your suit-case runneth over!

And your emotions while doing all this? Why, you've never before known what "calm content" could mean.

In the first place, you never feel countrified and unpopular in London, as you do in New York. Your clothes have a way of brightening up and looking noticeably smart as if they'd just enjoyed a sojourn at the dry cleaner's—and everybody you meet seems to care particularly for Americans. You are at home there—not merely with the at-home feeling which a good hotel and agreeable society give—but there's a feeling of satisfaction much deeper than this. Something in you, which has always known and loved England, is seeing familiar faces again—the something which made you strain your eyes over *Mother Goose* by firelight years ago, and thrill over *Ivanhoe* and anything which held the name "Sherwood Forest" on its printed page. It's something congenial—or prenatal—who knows? 282

(Oh yes! I answer very readily "Present!" when any one calls: "Anglomaniac!")

It was only natural that I should let my adoration for Great Britain show through in the copy I sent home to *The Oldburgh Herald*, and as if to prove that honesty is the best policy, I received a letter of praise from Captain Macauley. 283

"Anybody can run a foreign country down," he wrote, "but you've proved that you're original by praising one! Stay there as long as you have an English adjective left to go upon, then forget your sorrows, chase away down to Italy and show us what you can do with 'bellissimo.'"

But I didn't do this, for the letter overtook me only after I had reached Bannerley, and was seeing things which I could hope for no words, either English or Italian, to describe.

I left London on Friday—which I ought to have had better sense than to do, having been properly brought up by a black mammy—hoping to reach the home of my shipboard friends early enough Saturday morning to hear the pigeons coo under the eaves of Bannerley Hall. All my life I had cherished an ambition to hear pigeons coo under eaves of an ancestral place, and with this thought uppermost in my heart, I packed my suit-case and drove to Paddington Station. I received my first damper at the ticket window. 284

"Bannerley?" the agent repeated, looking at me with a shade of pity, as I mentioned my destination. "Bannerley?"

"Certainly, Bannerley!" I insisted, with some effort toward a dignified bearing, but the first glance at his doubtful face caused my spirits to sink. Being by nature an extremist, they sank to the bottom. All in a twinkling the cooing of pigeons in my mental picture was changed to the croaking of ravens. "It's not so very difficult to get to Bannerley, is it?"

He scratched his head.

"No-o—not in a general way, miss, but there ain't no telling *when* you'll get there."

I drew back, more hurt than angry.

"But my friends have already warned me that I shall have to change at Leamington—and Manchester—and Oldham—and——"

"Can't help that!" he exclaimed heartlessly, looking over my shoulder at the line of waiting tourists. "Since the coal strike, trains on them side-lines has been as scarce and irregular as a youngster's teeth at shedding time." 285

I tried to smile politely, but another glance at his face showed me that he wasn't expecting such an act of supererogation.

"Getting off into the unbeaten paths sounds pretty enough in a guide-book," he kept on hastily, "but the first thing you do when you meet an unbeaten path is to want to beat it!"

I faded out of the line and let my successor take my place.

"He's just an old grouch!" I told myself consolingly, as I got a seat next a window. "Nothing really terrible can befall you when traveling—if you've got a Masonic pin on your coat!"

(One of my Christie relations had thus decorated me and assured me.)

Then I forgot all about his gloomy warnings, for the train rumbled across a thousand street crossings—then out into all the sheep pastures in the civilized world, and—it was summer! 286

"This country *must* be Kent!" I mused, not geographically, but esthetically certain—as soft feathery green broke off occasionally into a pollard-trimmed swamp—then came up again a little later into a gentle, sheep-dotted rise. And I remembered the Duchess once more—"A stalwart, fair-haired lover, and a dozen Kentish lanes!"

I have lived to learn that this is common to Americans who have been brought up to understand that Kent is the garden-spot of England. No matter at which point along the entire coastline they may board a train, their first conviction upon seeing suburban scenery is that it *must* be Kent! (I say "suburban" advisedly, for none of it is far enough away from the other to be rural.)

So my journey through an elongated and rather circuitous Kent kept my mind away from the croakings of the ticket seller at Paddington—until the next morning at daybreak, when I found myself put down with mournful ceremony at a little wayside station which ought to have been labeled "St. Helena." 287

"Just as sorry as you are, miss, but this is your nearest hope for a train to Bannerley!" the guard said, by way of an appropriate farewell, so off I got.

"But this place is surely named St. Helena," I groaned, as I looked about me, yet the only actual similarity was in the matter of its being entirely surrounded. The island entirely surrounded by water, of course—this station entirely surrounded by land. I believe that I had never before in my life seen such a stretch of unimproved property!

"The woods and I—and their infinite call," I quoted, as I looked out somewhat shamefacedly across the acres. For it was exactly the kind of place I had always longed to possess for my very own—yet here I had arrived at it, and might, for all I knew to the contrary, take possession of it by right of discovery—yet I was feeling lonely and resentful at the very start. 288

Then I remembered Robinson Crusoe and took heart, straining my eyes in hope of a sail, but nowhere was there a human face to be seen, nor sign of life. Not even a freight car stood drearily on a side-track—and, as you know, you have to be very far away from the center of things not to find a freight car! None was here, however, for there wasn't a side-track for it to stand upon—the main line running in two shining threads far away toward Ireland.

The only moving bodies visible were a paper sack being blown gently down the track, a blue fly buzzing around a blackened banana peeling and a rook cawing overhead. I looked up at the rook and smiled philosophically.

"I anticipated a 'coo,' then apprehended a 'croak'—what I get is a happy compromise, a 'caw,'" I said, and I find that things usually turn out this way in the great journey of life. Nothing is ever so good, nor so bad, as you think it's going to be when you're standing at the ticket window. The great anticipator is also a great apprehender—therefore realization is bound to be a relief. 289

Then, as if in reward of my optimism, I began to scent the odor of escaping coffee.

"It *is* inhabited!" I cried.

Springing up, I darted around to the other side of the station, and there, in a clump of trees, lying snug and humane-looking in the morning light, was a tiny cottage. I waited, and presently there

issued from the doorway a man—wiping his mouth reminiscently.

He espied me at once and came up, cap in hand.

"Was you wanting something, miss?" he asked.

"A train," I replied, trying to sound inconsequential with the lordliness that comes of intense disgust. "I have a ticket to Bannerley—and I have friends there *waiting!*"

The man dared to smile.

"Since the coal strike that's mostly what folks does, miss," he explained.

There was a moment of strained silence, which was broken by the appearance of a young boy—an eerie creature who had seemed to glide straight out of the eastern horizon on a bicycle. The station-master turned to him.

290

"Take this here parcel up to Lord Erskine—and be quicker than you was yesterday!" he said.

The boy's face and mine changed simultaneously, his brightening, mine paling.

"Lord Erskine!" I cried, a little ghostly feeling of fear stealing over me—for my American instincts failed to grasp the rapidity with which dead men's shoes can be snatched off and fitted with new rubber heels in England—"Lord Erskine is dead."

The little messenger boy looked at me pityingly.

"E *wuz*," he explained, "but 'e ain't now!"

"And—and do you mean to tell me that this is the station for Colmere Abbey?" I demanded, turning again to the man.

"Yes, miss."

He tried hard not to look supercilious, but there, six feet above my head, was the name "Colmere" in faded yellow letters against the black background of the sign-board. And I had always believed in psychic warnings!

291

"I—I hadn't thought to look at the sign-board," I endeavored to explain. "It seems that it doesn't matter what your station is, for you're as far away from your destination at one place as at another—during the coal strike! You think I can't get a train to Bannerley until——"

"Perhaps to-night—perhaps not until to-morrow morning," he answered with cruel frankness, and I knew from heresay that trains did occasionally wander, comet-fashion, out of their orbit, and come through stations at unexpected moments. "Still, there's a railroad hotel about a mile down the track."

"A railroad hotel?"

"Where the men get their meals—the guards and porters!"

My spirits sank.

"That old kill-joy at Paddington knew what he was talking about!" I said to myself—then aloud: "But, couldn't I get a carriage, or a——"

292

He shook his head.

"We mostly uses bicycles around here—when we don't walk," he explained.

"But I must get to Bannerley!" I burst out in desperation. "And I am a first-rate walker! How far is it?"

I was beginning to realize that the adventure might make good copy, headed: "Wonderful Pedestrian Journey through Historic Lancashire." Many a slighter incident has called forth heavier head-lines.

"Walk?"

"Certainly—then take up the matter with the railroad company in Glasgow, just before I sail for home!"

My terrible manner caused him to look me over, quickly.

"Was you wanting to get to the village—or the hall?" he asked, evidently impressed by my severity, and my heart softened.

"To the hall," I answered. "Mrs. Montgomery is expecting me."

293

He tried hard not to show that he was impressed, but he failed. Evidently Mrs. Montgomery was a great personage, and I took on a tinge of reflected glory not to be entirely ignored.

"The hall is a mile from the village—and the village is three miles from here," he explained gently. "Of course, there's short cuts, if a body knows 'em—but for a lady like you——"

The click of the telegraph instrument clamored for his attention, so he reluctantly left me. I

remained outside, listening to the caw of the rook. Presently he came out again.

"There will be a train through here pretty soon—but it's coming from the direction of Bannerley instead of going toward there—still—"

"Still, it will give us occasion to hope for better things later on," I answered cheerfully. "And it has occurred to me that I might while away a portion of the morning by walking up to the gates of Colmere Abbey. That boy went in this direction, didn't he?"

"Not a quarter of a mile, miss—down in this direction," he assured me. "Just follow this road, and you'll find the lodge in a clump of trees." 294

The "May" hedges were glistening with the early sunbeams, and as I walked down the railroad track the distance seemed quite a good deal short of the quarter of a mile mentioned. I found the clump of trees indicated—then a small gray building. My heart bounded, and I rubbed my eyes to make sure that I was awake.

"Is this the entrance to Colmere Abbey?" I asked of the boy on the bicycle, who was turning out of the gate at that moment.

"This is one of the lodges—but not the grand one, madam!" he answered anxiously.

"Oh, indeed? But one can get to the park through this gate?" I persisted.

"Oh, yes, madam."

He showed an inclination to act as my esquire, but I got rid of him by promising him sixpence if he would take care of my bag until I returned to the station—then I crossed the greasy railroad track and entered the shade of the trees. It was far from being my ideal entrée into the old house of my heart's desire, but it was something of an adventure—until I reached the gates. There I was halted. 295

"Yes, miss—if you please?"

It was an acid voice, and I looked at the doorway of the house, out of which an old woman was issuing. She was garbed in profound black.

"I want to get in—to see the grounds of the abbey," I explained casually, but she was not to be overwhelmed by any airy nonchalance. She shook her head.

"But that can't be!"

The smile which accompanied this information was almost gleeful.

"No? But why not?"

She looked at me pityingly.

"Didn't you know we was in mourning?" she demanded, bristling with importance.

I instantly made a penitent face, then glanced appreciatively at her gown, but she gave no evidence of being a physiognomist. She failed to take note of my contrite expression. 296

"You can't go sight-seeing in here!" she said.

"Not even a little way?"

I accompanied this plea by the display of a shining half-crown, which I carried in my glove for emergency. That's one good thing about being away from the United States—you don't have to regard money so tenderly. You realize that shillings and francs and lire were made to spend for souvenirs and service, but dollars—ugh! They were made to put in the bank! So I twinkled this ever-ready half-crown temptingly in the morning light, but she shook her head again.

"While we was in mourning?" she demanded, with a gasp of outraged propriety. "Why—*wha'ud the minister say?*"

At this I turned away sadly—for I had been in England long enough to know there's never any use trying to surmise *what* the minister 'ud say! 297

"Just the same, you'd make a dandy old servant—and I'm a great mind to buy you and put you in my suit-case, along with the Sheffield candlesticks," I thought, as I made my way back to the station.

During my absence a train had come clattering in—and it stood stock-still now, while the engineer and the station-master held a long conversation over a basket of homing pigeons which had been deposited upon the platform. I viewed the locomotive listlessly enough—the walk having taken some of my former impatient energy away, but my interest was aroused as I came upon the platform by the appearance of a servant in livery, disentangling from one of the compartments a suit-case and leather hat-box.

The man's back was toward me, as he struggled to lift his burden high above the precious basket of pigeons which was usurping place and attention, but the look of the traveling paraphernalia held my eye for a moment.

"Could it belong to an American?" I mused. 298

The servant deposited the cases on the platform, then turned, still with his back toward me, and took part in the lively pigeon argument. I looked at the beautiful smoothness of the leather.

"Of course they're American!" I decided, for you must know that nearly any Englishman's luggage would compare unfavorably with the bags Aunt Jemima brings with her when she comes up to the city for a week's mortification to her nephews.

"Never judge an Englishman by the luggage he lugs!" is only a fair act of discretion.

I crossed the platform, partly to get away from the mournful sounds emanating from the wicker basket, and then, at the door of the little station I was arrested by another sound. It was a sound which had certainly not been there when I had left, half an hour before! I halted—wondering if there really could be anything in psychic warnings!

Inside the dingy little room some one was whistling! The melody was falling upon the air with a certain softness which, however, did not conceal its suppressed vehemence—and the tune was *Caro Mio Ben!*

299

"Anybody has a right to whistle it!" I told myself savagely, but I still hesitated—my heart standing still from the mere force of the hypothesis. After a moment it began beating again, as if to make up for lost time.

The whistling man inside left off his music—then I heard his footsteps tramping impatiently across the bare wooden floor. He finally came to the door and looked out. I glanced up, and our eyes met! It was *Caro Mio Ben! It was Caro Mio Ben!*

"Well?" he said.

He stood perfectly still for half a minute it seemed—making no effort toward a civilized greeting.

"Well!" I responded—as soon as I could.

"This is queer, isn't it?"

I looked at him.

"Queer?" I managed to repeat—that is, I heard the word escaping past the tightening muscles of my throat. "*Queer!*"

300

"Most extraordinary!"

"I should—I think I should like to sit down!" I decided, as he continued to stand staring at me, and I suddenly realized that I was very tired.

He moved aside.

"By all means! Come in and sit down, Miss Christie. This station fellow here tells me that you have been disappointed in your train."

"I have," I answered.

I might have added that I had been disappointed in everything most important in life, as well—but his own face was wearing such an expression of calm serenity that I was soothed as I looked at it.

"That's quite a problem here in England just now," he observed politely.

"So I have been informed."

After this, conversation flagged, until the silence made me nervous.

"I should think we ought to be asking each other—questions!" I suggested, trying to bring him to a realization of the necessary formalities, but he only turned and looked down at me, with a slightly amused, slightly superior smile.

301

"Questions?"

"About *ships*—and how long we intend staying—and what travelers usually ask!" I said.

He shook his head, as if the subjects held little interest for him.

"Why should I ask that—when I happen to know?" he inquired.

"You know—what?"

"That you came over on the *Luxuria*."

"Yes?"

"And that *The Oldburgh Herald* sent you—to write up the coal strike."

"Yes—it did."

"And that you are going to stay—some time."

I was decidedly uncomfortable.

"Will you please explain how you knew all this?" I asked.

His smile died away.

302

"Mrs. Hiram Walker wrote her son to call on me while I was in New York," he explained in his serious lawyer-like manner, "and he happened to leave a copy of *The Oldburgh Herald* in my rooms."

"Oh! That was quite simple, wasn't it?"

"Quite!"

It occurred to me then that there was no use trying to keep fate's name out of this conversation—and also it came to me that the orchids were no longer a mystery—but before I could make up my mind to mention this he turned to me ferociously.

"You *did* make a fool of me!" he accused.

My heart began thumping again.

"What do you mean?" I began, but he cut me short.

"It is this that I can not get over! The thought has come to me that perhaps if I might hear you acknowledge it, I might be able to forgive you better."

"Forgive me?"

303

He leaned toward me.

"If you don't mind, I should like to hear you say: 'Maitland Tait, I did make a fool of you!'"

"But I didn't!" I denied stoutly, while my face flushed, and all the fighting blood in me seemed to send forth a challenge from my cheeks. "I'll say what I *do* think, however, if you wish to hear it!"

"And that is——?"

"Maitland Tait, you made a fool of yourself!"

He looked disappointed.

"Oh, I know that!" he replied.

"You do? Since when, please?"

"Why, I knew it before I crossed the Ohio River!" he acknowledged, seeming to take some pride in the fact. "I—I intended to apologize—or something—when I got to Pittsburgh, but when I reached New York, on my way here, I saw that you were coming to England, too——"

"So you thought the matter could easily wait—I see!" I observed, then, to change the subject, I asked: "Have you been here long?"

304

"Two weeks! I knew that I should get news of you in *this* neighborhood, sooner or later."

I instantly smiled.

"I have come here for my first Sunday, you see, but——"

"But you haven't been to the abbey yet, have you?" he asked.

The boyish anxiety in his tone gave me a thrill. Something in the thought of his remembering my romantic whim touched me.

"No. I have just come from there—the lodge—but the old woman at the gates wouldn't let me in."

He looked interested.

"No? But why not?"

"The master of the house has just died," I explained. "It would be a terrible breach of etiquette to go sight-seeing over the mourning acres."

His lips closed firmly.

"Nonsense! I'll venture that's just a servant's whim." He slipped out his watch. "Shall I go over and try to beg or bribe permission for you? I'm not easily daunted by their refusals, and—I'll have a little time to spare this morning, if you'd care to put your marooned period to such a use."

305

"I *am* marooned," I told him, wondering for a moment what the Montgomerys would think of my delay, "and I should like this, of course, above anything else that England has to offer, but——"

Then, after his precipitate fashion, he waited for no more. He paused at the edge of the platform for a low-toned colloquy with Collins—I could easily distinguish now that the liveried creature was Collins—and the two disappeared down the car track. After the briefest delay he returned.

"What can't be cured must be ignored," he said with a shrug, as he came up. "The poor old devil evidently regards us as very impious and—American, but I made everything all right with her."

"But how—?" I started to inquire, also at the same moment starting down the track toward the lodge house, when he stopped both my question and my progress. 306

"Let us wait here—I have sent Collins to get a car for us from the garage not far away."

He led the way out to a drive, sheltered with trees, on the other side of the track, and we awaited the coming of Collins—neither showing any disposition to talk.

"Is this *your* car?" I presently asked, as the servant driving a gleaming black machine drew up in front of us. "I hadn't imagined that you would have your own car down in the country with you."

"I've had experience with these trains," he explained briefly, then he looked the car over with a masterful eye. "Yes, it's mine."

"I really shouldn't have needed to ask—there's so strong a family resemblance to the other one—the limousine you had in Oldburgh."

He looked pleased.

"I hope you'll like this one—it's a Blanton Six, you see," he explained with a pat of affectionate pride upon the door-handle as he helped me in. 307

Collins climbed to his place at the wheel, and without another word—without one backward look—I was whirled away into the Land of Long Ago—the period where I had always belonged.

At the second lodge—the grand one—I pinched myself. I had to, to see whether I was awake—or dreaming a Jane Austen dream. Maitland Tait, watching me closely, saw the act.

"You're quite awake," he assured me gravely.

"But—what are you?" I inquired. "Are you yourself—or Aladdin, or—"

I broke off abruptly, for the car was gliding over a bridge, and underneath was a silvery, glinting ribbon, that might, in fairy-land, pass for a river.

"Shall I stop the car and let you dabble the toe of your shoe in the water?" my guide asked.

I looked at him in bewilderment.

"I shan't be able to believe it's just water—unless you do," I explained. He had seen the look I let fall upon the shining breast of the stream. 308

"And I'll send Collins away."

"Of course! It's sacrilegious to let any wooden-faced human look upon—all this!"

The car obediently let us out, then steamed softly away, up the road and out of sight.

Mr. Tait held out his hand to me and helped me down the steep little river bank. I dabbled the toe of my shoe in the water, and as he finally drew me away, with the suggestion of further delights, I caught sight of a tiny fish, lying whitely upward in a tangle of weeds.

"How *could* he die?" I asked mournfully, as we walked away and climbed back to the level of the park. "It seems so unappreciative."

The man beside me laughed.

"*Things*—even the most beautiful things on earth—don't keep people—or fish alive," he said.

"They can't even make people want to stay alive—if this is all they have, and after all, the river is just a thing—and the park is a thing—and the house is a thing!" 309

We had walked on rapidly, and at that moment the house itself became apparent. I clutched his arm.

"A thing!" I denied, looking at it in a dazed fashion. "Why, it's the House of a Hundred Dreams! It's all the dreams of April mornings—and Christmas nights—and—"

"And what?" he asked gravely. But my eyes were still intoxicated.

"Why, it's Religion—and Art—and *Love*—and Comfort!"

He looked at it wonderingly, as if he expected to see statues representing these chapters in the book of Life.

What he saw was a tangle of gravel walks, gray as the desert, drawing away from grassy places and coming up sharply against the house. *Such* a house! A church—a tomb—a fluttering-curtained living-hall—all stretched out in one long chain of battlemented stone. Where the church began and the living-hall ended no one could say, for there were trees everywhere. 310

"The lower part of the abbey is in good condition, it seems," my conductor remarked, as we approached.

"Good condition!" I echoed. "Why, those doorways are as realistic as—Sunday morning! I feel that

I ought to have on a silk dress—and hold the corners of my prayer-book with a handkerchief—to keep from soiling my white gloves."

"If you listen perhaps you can hear the choir-boys," he said, after a pause, and without smiling.

"But there might be a sermon, too!" I objected.

High above the doors was a great open space of a missing window; then, over this, smaller spaces for smaller windows; and—in a niched pinnacle—the Virgin.

"How can she—a woman in love—endure all this beauty?" I asked, my voice hushed with awe.

"She's endured it for many centuries, it seems," he answered.

But we came closer then.

311

"Why, she hasn't even seen it—not once!" I cried, for I saw then that she was not looking up, but down—at the burden in her arms.

Instinctively Maitland Tait bared his head as we crossed the threshold.

"Shall we try to find a way through here into the gardens?" he asked.

312

CHAPTER XVII

HOUSE OF A HUNDRED DREAMS

The shadows inside the roofless old abbey were warm and friendly. The sunlight gleamed against the tombs with a cheer which always falls over very old grief spots.

"This quietude—this sense of all rightness—makes you feel that nothing really matters, doesn't it?" I asked, looking around with a sort of awed delight as we paused to read one or two inscriptions—voluminous in length and medieval in spelling.

The man at my side was less awed.

"Shall we go on to the gardens, then?" he asked. "You'll not think so little of temporal pleasures there, perhaps."

I looked up at him.

313

"But why?"

"Well, because these gardens are usually filled with suggestions of living joys—for one thing. There are millions of forget-me-nots, which always give a cheering aspect to the landscape—and there are frequently the flowers mentioned in Shakespeare's plays."

With a sigh of regret we left the sanctuary. Then, turning a corner of the old stone wall we came full upon a side of the house which was receiving shamelessly the biggest sun-kiss I had ever seen. But then, it was the biggest house I had ever seen. It was the gladdest sun—and it was the warmest blending. Between house and sun—as if they were the love children of this union—lay thousands of brilliant flowers.

When I could get my breath I made a quick suggestion that we go closer.

"I want to know which is rosemary—and which is rue!" I told him. But he stopped a moment and detained me.

We halted beside a fallen stone, at a point slightly separated from the walls of the house—a sort of half-way ground, where the shadow of the Greek cross on an isolated pinnacle seemed still to claim the ground for religion, against the encroachments of the work-a-day world. Maitland Tait's sudden smile was a mixture of amusement and tenderness.

314

"I've recently heard a story about this spot—this identical stone—which will interest you," he said. "A monk comes here at night—one of those old fellows buried in there."

I smiled.

"It's quite true!" he insisted. "People have seen him."

"I know it," I avowed seriously. "I was not smiling out of unbelief, but out of sheer joy at beholding with mine own eyes the 'Norman stone!'"

"He mutters his prayers on the midnight air,
And his mass of the days that are gone."

Maitland Tait looked at me in surprise.

315

"Do you know all the legends of the place?" he asked.

I shook my head sorrowfully.

"I wish I did," I replied. "For so many years this has been my House of a Hundred Dreams!"

We both fell into a moment's dreamy thoughtfulness, which I was first to cast aside.

"Come and tell me about the plants, if you can!" I begged. "Which *is* rosemary, and which is rue?"

We walked down a flight of worn steps, and came upon prim gravel pathways.

"This is rosemary," he said, "and here, by the sun-dial, is rue."

Then, even when I realized that this was the place where Lady Frances Webb had spent her wearisome days, to keep from hearing the clock chime in the hall, I could not be sad. The sun-dial was another grief spot, it was true, but it was an ancient grief spot—and it was located in a golden sea of sunshine, under a sky that was the reflection of forget-me-nots.

316

"She could gather the rue while the sun-dial told, all silently, of the day's wearing on," I said.

He looked at me uncertainly.

"Did she say that in her letters?" he asked.

"Yes. She had sent her lover away, you see, and—there was nothing else in life."

"And she longed for the days to pass silently?"

"She stayed out here as much as she could—to keep from hearing the clock in the hall," I told him. "The chime shamed the unholy prayer on her lips, she said—and the sound of the ticking reminded her of her heart's wearying beats."

"Of *their* hearts' wearying beats, you mean," he exclaimed, and a quick look of pain which darted into his face showed me that he comprehended. Then, for the first time, I began to grasp what a lover he would make! Before this time I had been absorbed with thoughts of him as a beloved.

Suddenly my hat began to feel intolerably heavy, and my gloves intolerably hot. I tampered fumblingly with the pearl clasp at my left wrist, and drew that glove off first. Maitland Tait was watching me. He saw my hand—my bare ringless hand. He stared at it as if it might have been a ghost, although it looked fairly pink and healthy in the warm glow of the noonday sun. Even the little pallid circle on the third finger was quite gone.

317

"Grace——" he said.

"Yes?"

"Does this mean that you're—you're——"

A discreet cough—a still distant, but distinctly warning cough—interrupted for a moment. Collins was coming toward us, from the ruins of the old abbey. Maitland Tait looked up and saw him coming, but he did not stop. On the other hand, the sight of his servant seemed to goad him into a hasty precipitation.

"Grace, will you marry me?" he asked.

"Of *course!*" I managed to say, but not too energetically, for the muscles of my throat were giving me trouble again.

"Soon?" he asked hungrily.

318

I felt very reckless and—American.

"Before the shadows pass round this dial again, if you *insist*," I smiled.

But his eyes were very grave.

"Without knowing anything more about me than you know now?"

"Why, I know everything about you," I replied, in some astonishment. "I know that you are the biggest, and the best-looking, and the dearest——"

"You know nothing about me," he interrupted softly, "except what I have told you. I am a working man! I have always had the mass hatred for class, and—and my grandfather was a coal-digger in Wales."

I was silent.

"Yet, you are willing to marry me?" he asked.

"Of course! Coal is—very warming," I answered.

Collins descended the flight of stone steps and came slowly along the gravel walk. When he had come to the respectful distance he stopped. No English servant ever approaches very close—as if there were a quarantine around the sacred person of the served.

319

"My Lord," he said, but stammeringly, as a man halts over a newly-acquired language—"My Lord, Mrs. Carr wishes to know if you will have lunch served in the oak room, or in the——"

"In the oak room," the man standing beside me answered readily enough. "And have the old wing opened and lighted, Collins. We want to see the pictures in there."

The servant breathed the inevitable "Thank you," and turned away.

I seemed suddenly to feel that the golden sea of sunlight was sweeping me away—up into the blue, which was the reflection of forget-me-nots. And there loomed big on my horizon a house that was a home!

"My *Lord?*" I demanded, as soon as I could speak.

Maitland Tait nodded reassuringly.

"My father died two weeks ago," he said. "And I *had* to come into the title."

"And this place is *yours!*" I sang out, feeling that all the years of my life I had been destiny's love-child. "This old abbey is yours! The park is yours! The garden is yours! The sun-dial is yours!"

"And the girl is mine!" he said, with a grave smile. "I am careless of all the other."

His gravity sobered my wild spirits.

"And your father was—Lord Erskine?" I finally asked.

"He *was*—Lord Erskine," he answered. "He married out of his station—far, far above his station, *I* think——"

His big beautiful mouth set grimly, but he said nothing more, and I knew that this was as heavily as he would ever tread upon the ashes of the dead. Gradually, bit by bit, I learned the history of the muddy pool of mistake and fault, out of which the tender blossom of his boyhood had been dragged. His father had never seen him, but a certain stiff-necked family pride had caused him to provide material bounty for his child. The combination of a good education and rugged plebeian industry had made him what he was.

"But why didn't you tell me—that day when you first came to see me and we talked about this place—why didn't you tell me that it was *your* ancestral home?"

He looked at me in surprise.

"Why, because I had made up my mind to marry you!" he said. "You told me that this old place was a sort of dreamland of yours—and I didn't want to complicate matters. I wanted your love for me to be a reality."

"Well, it—it is!" I confessed.

After a long while—that is, the sun-dial said it was a long while—spent this way a sudden thought of my waiting hosts at Bannerley came over me. I sprang up from the step of the pedestal where we had been sitting.

"I *must* get some word to Mrs. Montgomery!" I said. "They will be thinking that my rash American ways have got me into some dreadful scrape, I'm afraid."

But the serene man at my side was still serene. His face looked as if nothing on earth could ever cause him a pang again. He caught my hand and drew me gently, but rather steadfastly back to my place.

"Mrs. Montgomery knows everything—except that we are going to be married—when did you say, to-morrow?" he smiled. "I've been staying with them, and they told me about you, and I told them about you—and we had rather a satisfactory adjustment of neighborly relations."

I looked at him in awe. I could not quite shake off the idea that he had a miraculous lamp hidden about somewhere in his pockets. Things seemed to *happen* when he wished them to happen.

"Did you chance to know that I would take a bad train and be delayed here this morning at sunrise?" I asked, trying to look dignified and unawed. "Did you know that I should be compelled to waste precious morning hours pacing up and down a railway station platform?"

"Why, of course," he answered imperturbably. "Mrs. Montgomery sent me over to meet you."

I sprang up again, more energetically this time.

"Then why didn't you meet me?" I asked, with the horror of shocking English propriety overwhelming me. "Come! We must go to Bannerley at once."

He rose and followed me toward the main garden path. Then he pointed the way to the house door.

"I've had Collins telephone that your train was very, very late," he explained. "She'll not be surprised—nor too inquisitive. She even suggested this morning that if you shouldn't get in until evening—the drive to Bannerley is very fine by moonlight."

In the late afternoon the chilly dusk sent little forerunners ahead, which caused the old wing of the house to be lighted from within, instead of opened to the cool dying sunset. A cheery fire was kindled in the room which had once been the library of Lady Frances Webb.

324

The dampness and air of disuse disappeared, and it seemed as if personalities came forth from the shadowy corners and sat beside the fire with Maitland Tait and me.

"This was her own desk, they tell me," he said, as he was showing the ancient treasures to me, yet still looking at them himself with half-awed, almost unbelieving eyes. "This was where all her famous books were written."

I crossed the room to where the little locked secretary stood. Its polished surface was sending back the firelight's glow and seemed to proclaim that its own mahogany was imprisoned sunshine.

"And she wrote those letters here," I said in a hushed voice. "Do you suppose she has some of his letters locked away somewhere?"

He nodded, fitting the key to its lock very carefully.

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He drew me to a corner of the room

"All of them! All the letters written her by—Uncle James."

"And we are going to look over them together—you and I are going to read these love-letters—before we burn them?" I asked, quick joy making my voice tremulous.

For a moment there was silence in the old room, then he turned away from the secretary, and came very close.

"Why burn them—now?" he asked, his own strong voice of a sudden more tremulous than mine. "Why burn them, now, darling? Why not—hand—them—down?"

Then—in that instant—I knew what life was going to mean to me. And I felt as if I had the great joy of the world—hugged close—in a circle of radiance—like the *Madonna della Sedia*!

"I can be good—a very good woman—if I have your face before me," I told him.

After a while he smiled, then took my hand and drew me to a shadowy corner of the room.

"You haven't seen this yet," he said.

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There was a crimson velvet curtain hanging before a picture, and he drew aside the folds.

"This is—Uncle James,"

The candlelight shone against the canvas, and glittered in dancing little waves over the nameplate on the frame.

"*Portrait of the Artist, by Himself.*"

"Was it a comfort to her, I wonder?" my lover said, his thoughts only half with the past.

"A torturing comfort—the kind a woman like her demands," I answered. "She had to go to it every

hour in every day—and look at it—to make her heart ache, because it was only a picture. She was a human being—as well as a novelist, so that such as this could only add to her anguish. She wanted a *living* face——"

"She wanted—this?"

He set the candlestick down and put both arms round me.

"She wanted—*this*?" he breathed.

His face was close above mine—waiting for the first kiss. A moment later it came—descending gently, like some blessed holy thing. And it was that.

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"You are like him," I whispered. "Your face can make me good."

His arms tightened, and a smile escaped.

"And yours? What will you be like to me?" he asked.

I looked up, remembering.

"Like—just an American woman—a tormenting side-issue in your busy life?"

But he shook his head gravely.

"No—not that."

A casement was open near by, and he drew me toward the shaft of radiance which fell into the shadowed room.

Across the courtyard, white now with moonlight, were the ruins of the abbey. There shone a softened luster through the space of the absent window, and above, resplendent in her niche, stood the Virgin. Her head was bowed above the burden in her arms.

"Like that—*like that!*" he whispered.

THE END

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