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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IT PAYS TO SMILE ***

IT PAYS TO SMILE

NINA WILCOX PUTNAM

It Pays to Smile

By NINA WILCOX PUTNAM



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TO
GEORGE HORACE LORIMER
THE ALL-AMERICAN EDITOR

CONTENTS

[I](#)
[II](#)
[III](#)
[IV](#)
[V](#)
[VI](#)
[VII](#)
[VIII](#)
[IX](#)
[X](#)
[XI](#)
[XII](#)
[XIII](#)
[XIV](#)
[XV](#)
[XVI](#)
[XVII](#)
[XVIII](#)

IT PAYS TO SMILE

[Pg 9]

I

Since the very beginnings of Boston my people, who were, as every school child knows, an integral part of the original colony, had the commendable habit of recording all those events which bore in a manner either psychological or physiological upon their households or upon the affairs of state, in which they were ever active. In truth I make small doubt that but for the Talbots there would have been no Boston, or at least certainly no information regarding it recorded in intelligible English. And though in my girlhood I conceived my ancestors' style to be a trifle jejune and was myself fond of lighter and more frivolous works such as those of Emerson and Walter Pater, a weakness to which I confess with all due humility, I nevertheless realize the importance of the writings of my family and the desirability of maintaining our tradition of making an accurate record of such pertinent events as come under my immediate observation in order that future generations in their search after truth may have a reliable monument to depend upon. And this resolve has been greatly strengthened by perusing the ill-written, outrageously sensational and ill-considered newspaper versions of the affair which has so recently brought our historic name into the public notice under such distressingly vulgar and conspicuous circumstances.

[Pg 10]

Of course Talbot, the chauffeur, has enjoyed it all immensely, thereby to my mind proving once and for all that he has no genuine claim upon the name, and that his pretension of belonging to a younger Western branch is, as I have consistently maintained, absolutely fallacious. But I show weakness by digression. Permit me to recount the tale from its true beginning, which was, of course, my unfortunate answering of that advertisement in the *Transcript*.

When the wretched thing came to my attention Euphemia and I were seated at the supper table; she at the head and I at the side—a custom she has insisted upon since our parents' death, her position being that due to the elder sister and the rightful head of the family; and the table has continued to be set thus, though at the time of my rebellion I was fifty and she sixty, and it was absurd that she should maintain a formality instituted when she was twenty and I was ten. I had often disputed with her about it, but to no avail.

"My dear Freedom," she would rebuke me, "I am the elder and I know what is best for youth. So long as I am here this household shall be conducted properly!"

And nothing served to move her from that point of view.

Well, upon the portentous evening when my rebellion began we were sitting as usual, promptly at

five-thirty, in the cheerful if shabby dining room of our vast and dilapidated old mansion on Chestnut Street, with the sun shining brightly upon the neatly darned table linen, the zinnias from the garden and the few remaining bits of family silver. It can hardly be said that Old Sol spread his refulgent glory upon very much to eat, for he did not, there being nothing but a pot of tea, four very thin half slices of toast and the evening *Transcript*. According to her custom Euphemia looked at this first herself.

[Pg 11]

"I perceive that the Republican Party is indignant with the Administration," she informed me. "And that a mail service is to be established by air from New York. How shocking! The postman will very likely drop things from the aeroplane! I don't approve of the Government taking such risks with other people's letters. It is positively unseemly. Letters should be brought to one's door by a person with a blue coat and a whistle."

"They probably will be," I ventured. "The radical changes in life only affect the big things at first." Euphemia gave me a sharp look.

"Don't think too much, Freedom," she admonished me. "It is unfeminine in a younger person. And take care—your jabot almost went into your tea!"

I set down the cup, which I had in truth been holding in such a way that my lace cravat was endangered. I am occasionally rather given to daydreaming; a reprehensibly slack mental habit of which I have been unable wholly to break myself, and I was grateful for the merited reproof. Well, I set down the cup and put out my hand for the newspaper, which Euphemia, having glanced at the headlines, had finished reading. Again she rebuked me, this time with a gesture, and rang the bell. I subsided until the fourteen-year-old colored girl who constituted our domestic staff made her appearance, enveloped in a white apron which gave her a curiously grown-up appearance when viewed from the front, as it had been intended for an adult and reached the floor, but which, seen from the rear, revealed her immaturity.

[Pg 12]

"Galadia, hand this paper to Miss Freedom!" said Euphemia with dignity. And when the child had complied: "That is all; you may go!"

And Galadia made her exit, slamming the kitchen door behind which her voice immediately rose in song:

Kiss yo' Honey-Baby-Doll!

"Good heavens!" exclaimed my sister, rising in wrath. "What ever will become of that child?"

And gathering her woolen shawl about her she swept into the kitchen, her cap strings tremulous with indignation, and I was left to a swift and guilty perusal of the newspaper. I use the adjective "guilty" because I knew how thoroughly Euphemia would disapprove of the section to which I, for the seventh time in as many days, turned. It was the advertising page that I selected, and my eagerness was resultant from a desperate resolution which I had secretly made.

I was going to work.

For the first time in the history of my ancient and honorable family, a female Talbot was seeking remunerative employment. Terrible as I knew this act to be I was unalterably resolved upon it, and was keeping my secret from my dear sister only until armed with actual employment, for I was but too well aware of what her attitude would be, and determined to waste no time in disputing a theoretical situation, but once strengthened by actually being engaged in some capacity I would face her wrath. Besides, were she to learn prematurely of my plan, she was quite capable of attempting to lock me in my chamber as a preventive measure.

[Pg 13]

But though so long recreant in my decision to take what after mature consideration I deemed the right and proper course, it was not for nothing that my parents, despairing of ever being blessed with a son, had bestowed upon me the family name of Freedom. There had always been a male Freedom Talbot, and his tradition had ever justified his name; and at length I was determined to live up to it.

My desperate decision had, of course, a pecuniary basis. We were poor; there is no denying it. Our parents had left us the house and an income of seven hundred a year, which for two maidens who would presumably marry was not insufficient in the day of our inheritance. But no mate ever having chosen either of us, or been chosen by either of us, and the cost of living having risen so inexplicably, our situation had gradually become greatly altered. Euphemia steadily opposed the idea of any remunerative work, no matter how genteel, and so far I had unwillingly submitted, the more readily because we were utterly without training or equipment. But when in a single week the tax on the house was increased simultaneously with the price of butter, my resolve took shape, and my perusal of the advertising sheets began.

On this fateful evening the "Wanted" column at first appeared to be more than usually devoid of possibilities. There were the usual "Perfect 36-38" for Jewish concerns that apparently manufactured clothing. Shopgirls were needed, and houseworkers, but I could not bring myself to either of these occupations except as a last resort. Typists were also desired, and bookkeepers; but I feared my lack of practical education would count against me. A traveling saleslady was wanted, and a book agent; and as I was pondering the possibilities set forth by these my eye fell upon the fateful notice which led to all my strange adventures. It was printed rather larger than its fellows, and set forth an extraordinary request.

[Pg 14]

WANTED: An indigent old lady of impeccable social standing, to act as chaperon to a common young girl who is motherless. Must be dowdy, incompetent, financially

embarrassed, snobbish, and never employed before. No pretenders will be considered. Excellent salary and a chance to see the world. Apply Apartment —, Plaza Hotel, between five and seven P.M.

Conceive, if you can, the astonishment with which I perused this advertisement. Had I inserted it myself, stating the sort of position for which I was best fitted, I could in all candor have stated my case and situation no better. Indeed I was obliged to reread the notice several times before feeling able to credit my own senses. Then I tore the corner containing it from the paper, hastily concealed it in my reticule, refolded the remaining sheets in such a fashion as to conceal the damage done, and laid it, as was our custom, upon the files under the china closet.

Then with quickly beating heart I got the porcelain tub and suds, spread the oilcloth upon the side table and completed my daily task of washing and putting away the tea china with fingers which trembled so that they were scarcely equal to the task.

Then, when Galadia, who refused to dwell with us continuously, had been sent home to her parents, and Euphemia had settled herself to her crochet work in the drawing-room I stole upstairs, upon the pretext of a slight headache, and in the privacy of my chamber again perused that amazing scrap of paper.

Could it by chance be the expression of some dull person's humor? Was it possibly a snare of some kind? But no, the last seemed improbable inasmuch as the requirements were a direct negation of anything which would appear desirable to the kidnapper or any such vicious character. Moreover, the address given inspired a degree of confidence, because, though I was under the impression that all expensive and fashionable hotels must be—well, not suitable for the conservative female element of our dear city to frequent, still there could be no real danger incident to a visit to them by a person like myself, who sought no evil. Considering this point I looked at my dear father's watch, which I always carried—Euphemia very properly having pre-empted mother's—and discovered that the hour was but six.

[Pg 15]

Then my resolution took firm hold upon me, and without more ado I got out my bonnet and pinned it on with resolute fingers, found my best silk gloves, and taking my dolman and reticule crept softly down the stairs, excitement high within my breast.

At the door of the once-elegant, now shabby reception room I paused to peek at Euphemia's unconscious back which was just visible, very stiff and correct, in the lonely drawing-room beyond. Fortunately she did not hear me, and having thus, as it were, silently saluted her, and feeling uncommonly like an errant daughter about to consummate an elopement, I shut the front door behind me with care and stepped forth into the roseate late afternoon sunlight and my desperate adventure.

I find it difficult indeed to express the mixture of trepidation and elation which possessed me upon this occasion. The very streets, familiar since childhood, took on a strange aspect, and the walk to the hotel was magically shortened by my excitement, though on its threshold I hesitated and might have turned back at the last moment had it not been for the inquiring gaze of the large uniformed colored person who stood at the doorway. Fearful that he would address me if I delayed longer I gathered courage anew and entered through a most alarming revolving door.

[Pg 16]

I had never been in this hotel before, and neither had any of the ladies of my acquaintance, with the exception of Annie Tresdale, whose cousin from Chicago stayed there overnight and had Annie to luncheon; and she, I was aware, had felt the most severe criticism of the place owing to the fact that a female had smoked a cigarette in the dining room. I afterward ascertained that it was Annie's cousin who had done this, and so, of course, we never discussed the subject further. But I will confess the place bore no aspect of viciousness beyond a good many electric fixtures, and the young man at the desk was exceedingly polite and helpful, considering the number of persons who were simultaneously trying to engage his attention.

"Apartment B? Oh, yes; for Mr. Pegg!" said he in reply to my query. "There is one lady up there already! Boy! Show madam up to Mr. Pegg!"

And at this a youth appareled as a page took me in charge and led me to what I at once perceived to be an elevator. At the door I balked.

"I prefer to walk if there are stairs," said I.

The page looked as if he thought I had gone suddenly mad.

"It's six flights!" he said. And so I, realizing that the building was indeed a tall one, followed him into the trap, in which were several other persons, who appeared to me to be uncannily nonchalant. Maintaining as dignified an exterior as I could I concealed my alarm at what was a wholly novel experience to me, and was presently disgorged, quite unharmed, upon what the page assured me was the seventh story. He then preceded me down an interminable blue-carpeted hallway and paused before a door upon which he tapped.

[Pg 17]

After a moment it was opened by a manservant of extremely respectable appearance.

"Mr. Pegg?" I inquired.

"From the advertisement, madam?" said the servant.

"Yes," I replied with dignity.

"Is that all?" said the page.

"That is all, thank you, little boy," I replied, at which the child departed with an air of

disappointment.

And then the manservant ushered me into a magnificent anteroom done in gold paneling and mauve velvet upholstery, most beautiful and in the best of taste. I subsequently ascertained that I was in the royal suite of the hotel, and that it occupied the entire floor.

"Will you be seated, please?" said the servant, handing me to a golden armchair. I dropped his arm, which I had taken upon entering, as is the custom in my circle where a butler is still maintained. "Mr. Pegg is interviewing another applicant in the drawing-room, but I believe he will shortly be at liberty." And with that he left me.

I took a tentative perch on the very edge of my magnificent seat, clasping my reticule firmly and feeling as though I had suddenly discovered myself in the midst of a dream which refused the half-conscious mind the acknowledgment of unreality. It was extraordinary, really, and I wondered who and what the unseen applicant might be, and if the position might not already be filled. I almost hoped it was, so overpowering was the room in which I sat, and yet it was patent that the advertiser must truly be a person of means and that the emolument would be considerable—certainly not less than four or five hundred a year—and I trembled at the thought that perhaps fortune had already dedicated this to another.

[Pg 18]

But before many moments had passed the door into the adjoining room was opened and two persons entered—a man and a woman—the later unquestionably my predecessor.

She was a vulgar overdressed person much younger than myself, and at the moment her attractions were not enhanced by a fit of anger. Her language was wholly unintelligible to me.

"Of course I thought you was a motion-picture bird!" she snapped, "and character parts is my middle name. Me a governess? My Lord—not for a gift!"

"Don't trouble yourself; nobody'll try and force it on you," said the man. "Good day, ma'am!"

And he opened the outer door for her impudent departure. Upon closing it after her he caught sight of me and stared. I confess I returned the favor quite involuntarily, for Mr. Pegg was certainly the most extraordinary man I had ever seen. He was about six feet four inches in height, and so heavy that at first his tallness was hardly remarkable. He was perhaps sixty years of age, though magnificently preserved, and his ruddy clean-shaven face had a jaw which my dear father would have described as "iron." His expensive clothing was worn with a negligent air, and his voice was like the roar of a lion.

"Jumping—er—grasshoppers!" he exclaimed, his eyes riveted upon me. "Are you made up for the part?"

[Pg 19]

At once I rose to my feet in proper indignation.

"I never paint!" I exclaimed angrily. "My color is natural, though perhaps unusual at my age. If it is your intention to get gentlewomen here merely to insult them, Mr. Pegg, I have no further occasion for remaining!"

To my surprise Mr. Pegg merely chuckled at this, and then assuming a more composed manner held open the door to the inner room, making a deep and courteous bow as he did so.

"My dear madam—a thousand pardons!" he said. "You seemed too real to be anything genuine. Please walk in."

And so, wondering if perhaps the poor man was insane, and far from feeling at ease, I complied, entering an enormous drawing-room and accepting the seat on the far side of an incongruously littered table—filled with papers, notes, and so on, and all the paraphernalia of a business man's desk. Mr. Pegg took the armchair behind it and settled to a critical inspection of me, though he did not look at me continuously. I faced the sunset, but as my face was clean, and as at my age I had got past attempting concealment of my crow's feet, I was quite composed—outwardly. Yet I could feel that his glance rested upon my hat, my hair, my silk gloves, my walkrite boots, even—though they were discreetly covered by my dress. And all at once my terror of him diminished. It would be difficult to say just why, but very possibly it was the tone of his voice when he spoke again, for though his diction was shockingly incorrect there was a certain kindness, a gentleness to it which was unmistakably genuine.

[Pg 20]

"You ain't a Winthrop by any chance, are you, madam?" he asked.

"No my name is Talbot," said I.

And then as he appeared a trifle disappointed I elaborated, for his ignorance was patent. "My ancestors came over a generation before Winthrop," I said gently, for, of course, I would not like that family to hear that I had in any way classified them as *nouveaux*.

"Ah!" said Mr. Pegg, brightening again. "That's fine! That's fine, Madam Talbot—a real aristocrat!"

"I am Miss Talbot," I again corrected him.

"Well," said he doubtfully, "of course, that's not quite as desirable as a widow would be, is it now? To take care of my daughter, I mean. Still, in some ways an old maid is better. More particular, you'd be. And what's more, you are born blue-blooded, not just married to it!"

"Mr. Pegg," said I, "will you not set forth the exact nature of the occupation you propose for me?"

"That's it!" he cried, thumping the table. "That's the stuff exactly.

"I beg pardon?" said I.

"Talk like that!" he shouted. "And learn her to talk the same—give her some class!"

"You expect me to teach your daughter grammar?"

"Teach her everything!" said the giant. "Polish her up; finish her off—but not by instructin' her. My Lord, no! She'd never stand for it! Just stick round—be with her—let a little Boston rub off on her, and set her right when she makes a break."

"A sort of governess?" I ventured.

"Companion, chaperon—you get me!" said her parent, and leaned back in his chair beaming satisfaction. "Now look-a-here, Miss Talbot, I'll put the matter straight to you. I am a rich man, but I'm a roughneck and I know it. There is a few things I ain't been able to buy for myself, and refinement is one of them. But I calculate to pry off a little for my Peaches—no culls on this family tree if a little pruning and grafting can turn it into a perfect Seedless Apperson. Does that mean anything to you?"

[Pg 21]

I reflected a moment, and though the man's actual terminology was unintelligible to me the sense of his imagery was somehow perfectly clear.

"You speak of her as a young tree!" said I. "I think I do understand. 'Just as the twig is bent the tree's inclined.'"

This plainly interested him.

"True!" he exclaimed. "Just that. Well, as I was saying, I've just cleaned up the biggest deal the California fruit growers ever heard of—and I started out as a picker with a bunch of Hindus, getting four cents a lug for oranges! To-day I've got—well, it don't matter how many millions; and a daughter that's never been let off the home ranch until three weeks ago. Her mother died when she come. Well—never mind that either! And now I've made my haul and I've got a little time to give her—and to living generally. I'm a practical man, Miss Talbot. When I commence grafting a new orchard of Golden Americans on a twenty-acre stretch of old wild stock I cut, splice and bind it right, and I don't hurry myself until I get the grafts I want and the proper season and everything. And the same with the culture of my American Beauty. I've left her grow strong and wild for twenty years now, and she's about ready for cultivation. And I feel you are the right one for the job. You are hired!"

[Pg 22]

"But my dear Mr. Pegg!" I protested. "You really are not in the least informed as to my qualifications."

"You don't imagine that a feller that's been picking men for thirty years—Dagos, Greasers, Japs, Hindus, everything that could strip fruit or thought they could—needs much wising up about a mere female woman, do you?" he demanded. "I advertised for exactly what I wanted, and you are it! You are hired."

"But, Mr. Pegg——" I vainly endeavored to interrupt.

"Your salary will be five thousand dollars a year, your keep and all expenses," he went on as if I had not spoken. "You will commence work to-morrow morning at nine o'clock and the next day we sail for Italy and a course in how to be refined though American."

I assure you that my senses staggered beneath the force of his announcement. Five thousand dollars a year! Italy! Incredible! Like a dream come true.

"My Eastern bank is the Guarantee," said he. "Look me up if you like. I have the money and a honest name. Nobody in the world's got a thing on me. And as the notice is kind of short, and you might like a little advance to buy some knitting or something to take with you, here is a hundred to bind the bargain. And now good night, Miss Talbot—I got the Eastern Apple Growers coming in ten minutes. See you to-morrow at nine! Good night, good night!"

And almost immediately I found myself edged into the anteroom, where already several persons—fruit venders, I presume—were in waiting.

"But, Mr. Pegg," I managed to ejaculate, "your daughter may not like me. Am I not to meet her before I leave?"

[Pg 23]

"I should say not!" exclaimed her father. "She doesn't know anything about this. I am leaving the breaking of the whole idea to you! Good night!"

With these alarming words the door shut behind me; and presently, I scarcely knew how, I found myself once more upon the solid reality of the Boston street, with only the hundred-dollar bill as evidence that the whole experience had been other than a dream.

II

[Pg 24]

As my dear father used to say, it is personality rather than character which holds the world's attention, and this was undoubtedly the case with Miss Alicia Pegg, or Peaches, as she was termed by her surviving parent. It is the unqualified fact that even at this tumultuous period of my life it is her personality rather than my esteemed sister's character which overshadows my memory. And although without doubt Euphemia's impeccable virtue and righteousness should have won the struggle I find myself impatient of her just reproaches, her critical indignation, and even of her final cold and terrible dismissal of me from the house of my fathers as meet

punishment for the crime of earning five thousand dollars per annum; a feat which she somehow contrived to make appear in the light of an outrage unworthy of serious discussion, and rendering me unfit to remain longer under the paternal roof.

True, I had already dismissed myself before she did so, the fact being implicit in my agreement with Mr. Pegg. And as for my father's roof, there had been rather more than a likelihood of its being permanently removed from over both our heads had we attempted to remain beneath it in idleness much longer. But Euphemia was a true woman—far more genuinely feminine than I shall ever be, and her heart ever overruled her reason. In fact she had often publicly maintained that it was unwomanly to reason very much. Secondly, I had for weeks anticipated that the announcement of my intention of going to work would result in a terrible scene, and so was somewhat prepared for the deluge, though I had hoped it would be less violent than it proved.

[Pg 25]

I will draw a veil over this section of my narrative, because it was purely a family affair, of no possible interest to the public, and I do not believe that sister truly meant all that she said. Suffice to recount that I left her seventy-five dollars with the promise—unaccepted—to send more shortly, and departed at eight-thirty the following morning, taking a few belongings in the small trunk which I had had at school when a girl, and receiving a tearful farewell from Galadia, if not from my dear sister, for whom in reality I was setting forth into the wide world.

"Freedom Talbot," said I to myself as the hack which I had felt justified in hiring to transport me to the hotel moved away—"Freedom Talbot, face the world with a smile—and soon you will be smiling in your heart. Freedom should mean more than a name to you—it should mean and must mean the welcoming of adventure."

And thus resolutely putting behind me the last vestige of feminine weakness I assumed in spirit at least the attitude which I knew my dear father would have required of the son he had hoped I would be, and was presently set down before the hotel, where I directed the porter about my trunk, surrendered my dear father's umbrella, my own folding lace parasol and dolman, together with my valise, to the same little boy who had so kindly attended me the day before, and for whom I had remembered to bring a package of ginger cookies. Even the elevator, that flying gilded bird cage, held no terrors for me to-day, and I ascended to the seventh floor without a qualm.

[Pg 26]

So much for character and its hold upon the human mind. The entire episode of leaving what for fifty years had been my home is somewhat hazy. What I encountered upon entering the anteroom of the Copley-Plaza's royal suite for the second time I shall never forget. And this evidences my claim regarding personality.

It was precisely one minute of nine by my dear father's chronometer, and my arrival must have been expected, and yet several moments elapsed prior to the opening of the door outside of which I stood. In point of fact I eventually opened it myself, inasmuch as it was not quite closed and from the noise inside I deduced that my knocking and the ringing of the small boy who accompanied me were not discernible above the clamor. The most amazing language came out to me.

"Come on you, seven!" said a female voice excitedly. "Oh baby! Come, you loving little Joe!" said a male voice.

It was at this juncture that I entered, the patience and perhaps the curiosity of my young companion breaking under the strain, and then we beheld a most remarkable picture.

Seated upon either end of the gold-and-marble table in the middle of the magnificent and formal apartment were a young man and a young woman. The latter was in the very act of shaking dice from the palm of her hand. I at once recognized them because my dear father indulged in backgammon, and possessed a pair. But the young female who was occupied with them resembled nothing I had ever before encountered.

[Pg 27]

To begin with, she was of tremendous height—the tallest girl I had ever beheld or ever shall, standing, as I afterward ascertained, six feet two without the unwholesome French heels she later affected. Her exquisite face was as clear cut and regular of feature as that upon the shell cameo which my dear father gave my dear mother when they became betrothed. Her hair was so brilliantly gold as to seem artificially gilded—not with chemicals but with burnished metal—and waved low over her ears with a grace impossible of imitation by the hair dresser's art. Her coloring was perfect and her wide set eyes were startlingly dark brown, as were the rather heavy brows above them.

This young Juno was clad in a dress of violet satin heavily embroidered in gold and coral beads, a garment clearly intended for the most elaborate of afternoon functions, and this costume was further embellished by a pair of black-and-white sports shoes, such as are worn upon tennis courts. But curiously enough this outrageous costume was not the first thing that registered upon my vision. The girl herself shone like the sun, dwarfing her garments and almost neutralizing them.

Of the young man I will say only this: He was a chauffeur, properly liveried, and though a clean, decent-looking young man, he was a distinctly common person, a thought which curiously did not occur to me until later. He was an ugly young man with a long nose.

It was a full moment that I stood in the doorway before they saw me, and then the girl slid from her perch with a blank look of amazement.

"Judas Priest! Holy mackerel!" she said involuntarily. Then quickly recovering herself she came forward politely. "I guess you are in the wrong pew," she said. "Did you want anybody?"

[Pg 28]

"It's for you, Miss Peaches," said the infant who carried my luggage. "The new nurse has come."

"What d'y'er mean—new nurse?" queried the beauty, wrinkling her handsome nose. "Are you sure this is for our ranch?"

"Perhaps your father has been up to something new, Peaches," said the chauffeur, sliding from his end of the table and removing the cap, which had all the time remained upon the back of his red head.

I felt it time to enlighten them.

"I am the new governess for Miss Alicia Pegg," I said with what dignity I could muster under the circumstances. "Mr. Pegg engaged me yesterday."

"There!" exclaimed the chauffeur. "I told you so!"

"Shut up, Dicky!" snapped the beauty, becoming suddenly serious, not to say alarmed, and looking down upon me from her enormous height very much as if I had been something terrible—like, say, a mouse. "Shut up, Dicky, and let me handle this. So my old man hired you, did he?" she went on gravely. "Without a word to me! Well, that's not your fault. We will have to talk this over in private. Sit down, ma'am; here's a nice chair. Get out, cutie!"

This last was addressed to the little page boy, who promptly dropped my baggage and prepared for flight. There was that in the young woman's voice which betrayed the habit of command. But with a gesture I detained him.

"Wait, little boy. I have something for you this time!" I said.

The boy stopped in his tracks and waited quite as promptly as if it were a custom with him, while I delved into the depths of my reticule and produced six nice brown sugar cookies, which I presented. He was pleased, I perceived that. Indeed he was quite wordless with surprise. But I knew they were wholesome and that six were not too many, and presently he was shut out by the chauffeur, who leaned against the closed portal shaking with unaccountable mirth. Miss Pegg seemed to see no humor in the situation any more than did I myself, but led me to the window and made me sit there opposite her. The Dick person leaned against the center table, toying with the dice.

[Pg 29]

"What's the name, did you say?" she inquired.

"My name is Freedom Talbot—Miss Talbot!" said I.

"Gee! That's funny!" said Miss Peaches Pegg.

"It sure is!" remarked the chauffeur.

"It's Dick's name, too!" said my hostess. "Make you acquainted—shake hands with Mr. Talbot, Miss Talbot!"

There was nothing to do but acquiesce, for the young chap without the least trace of self-consciousness came forward most politely.

"Pleased to meetcher!" he said. "I wonder are you any relative to my Aunt Lucy? That's my father's sister, but he got killed in a gun fight up to Nome."

"I scarcely think it likely," said I. "Our family is practically extinct."

"Well, never mind the family tree just now!" said Alicia. "And let's get down to cases on this dry-nurse business. Of course, Miss Talbot, I realize you are not to blame in this. But it's got to be understood right here and now. Tell me what the old boy put over on me this time?"

[Pg 30]

Well, I recounted the tale in as much detail as I could recall, amid continuous interruptions from my strange audience, beginning with my situation at home, and ending with my quarrel with Euphemia. When my recital was complete Miss Peaches gave a long whistle, which feat was amazingly expressive of her emotions.

"Well, see here, Miss Freedom," she said. "As I get the dope, it is, that you are to take me out and show me the world and everything—to teach me what little it is proper for me to know—and how to tell the culls from the sound fruit? Well, well! Do you believe you can do it?"

"I, of course, believe that I would be a proper influence and shield for a young woman!" I replied quietly. "Else I would not have engaged to perform such a task."

"And you'd sure be gosh-awful disappointed if you didn't go to Europe, wouldn't you?" she went on.

As I made no reply to this she continued to guide the conversation.

"I think you are a damn good sport to break away at your age," she went on. "And it would be a crime to send you back to the corral. I know just how it must feel."

"I bet you do!" said the Dick person. "After the ranch!"

"You see, he means our home ranch," the girl explained. "Pa has kept me there since I was a seedling. Never been away from it until three weeks ago—kept me pure and healthy and everything. But I've got fed up on it, and I'm glad to get loose and see life, even with you tagging along. Tell you what I'll do. So long as you've got your camp all broke I'll help you to see the world if you'll help me to see the world instead of preventing it. I'll be reasonable if you will. Are you on?"

[Pg 31]

"I am!" said I, half hypnotized by her charm. "I'm on!"

"Good! It's a bet!" cried Peaches, suddenly shaking my hand with a grip of most unladylike vigor. "Now let's dope this out some more. I've bought all the clothes in the stores in San Francisco, at least all costing over a hundred dollars each, as befits my new society stunt, so we ought to start right off and go some place where we know somebody besides the head waiters. Do you really know a lot of swells?"

"I—well, really—I know the proper people, of course," said I. "But I don't think that you would fancy Boston very much."

"Oh, Boston is all O. K." she said. "Only, of course, it's not like San Francisco—or even Fresno. No pep, and a rotten climate. Don't you know any gay ducks some other place?"

"Well, let me cogitate the matter," said I. "I know the Loringstons, in New York—two charming maiden ladies."

"Hold me—or I'll die of excitement!" said Peaches. "Nothing doing! If I've got to be pushed into the world of fashion and gayety I want there to be some class to it—snappy stuff—titles and everything. Do you know any titles?"

"Only the dean of Radcliffe," I responded; "unless one were to except the Countess Veruchio. But she lives in Monte Carlo. She was my first cousin until she married this foreign person."

Miss Pegg's large eyes grew incredibly larger, and instinctively she turned her gaze toward the neglected dice upon the center table. I shuddered at her words which followed. Had I already, unwittingly in my novitiate as guide, mentor and friend, set her upon evil ways? I deeply feared so.

"A countess!" she breathed. "Monte Carlo! Why, that's in Italy! Oh boy! Oh boy! Say, do they rattle the bones at Monte Carlo?"

[Pg 32]

III

[Pg 33]

How many persons must perforce get all their romance at second hand! Of course, as my dear father often said, gentlewomen should get their experiences from books and from the stage, and no lady experiences the primal emotions except vicariously. But none the less I had occasionally been aware of the desire to live more full a life than hitherto circumstance had rendered possible. Now I was brought into such intimate contact with a young career that I felt almost as though I were indeed living it myself, and not half an hour after my entrance upon my new duties I was, as it were, engulfed in the personality of my charge.

"Come on into your room!" she said, picking up my carpetbag as easily as if it had been a mere trifle. "Come on, Dicky; bring the box!"

The Dicky person obeyed whistling a jaunty tune, and presently I found myself established in a most luxurious bedroom. The chauffeur vanished, closing the door, and Peaches, disposing the luggage upon a receptacle constructed for that very purpose, perched upon the foot of the bed, her long limbs making that lofty elevation none too high for her. I soon learned that she seldom sat upon a chair if anything else offered.

"Say, Miss Talbot," she began as I laid out my toilet articles—"say, Miss Talbot, isn't Dick a king?"

"Eh?" said I, startled.

"I said isn't Dick a corker?" she repeated. "Do you know, I would have just about died out on the ranch if it hadn't been for him. Pa picked him up in Fresno when he was a hopper—picking hops with a bunch of greasers. Brought him home for me to play with. We went swimming together and riding together and everything when we were kids. Then pa sent him to school with me, and when he got some learning he gave him a job as foreman on the home outfit."

"He seems a nice young person," said I, "but he is a chauffeur!"

"You bet he is!" said Peaches enthusiastically. "The first car pa bought made him that! He can do anything with a car. I am in love with him!"

"Miss Pegg!" I said horrified. "A servant! What would your father say!"

"He'd say considerable!" remarked Peaches. "But he doesn't know it. And anyhow, I don't want to marry Dicky, even if he is your cousin. I just like being in love with some one, and he's simply crazy about me!"

Her innocence, not to say ignorance, was appalling. High time, indeed, that she had a proper chaperon!

"You must not play with so serious a subject!" I said severely. "And the young man is no relation of mine!"

"How can you be sure of that?" asked the terrible young woman. "There may have been some live wire in your family that went West, you know!"

To this I had no reply, for in point of fact my father's younger brother had indeed been a wild spirit who refused to enter the ministry and had vanished to the West, from which region he had never returned nor sent any token of his existence except, upon one occasion shortly after his departure, a specimen of polished redwood, which at that very moment was reposing in our curio

[Pg 34]

[Pg 35]

cabinet at home. I determined, however, to make no mention of the circumstances. One is so seldom able to avoid one's relatives.

"Do you not think a simpler frock would be better for luncheon?" I asked, changing the subject. Love was rather too personal a matter on which to press just at first, but really the girl's clothing was certainly somewhere within my legitimate province. "Your gown is very beautiful. And you won't be offended, but I am sure your father expects me to tell you these things."

She looked at my own costume by way of reply; not rudely, but frankly and interestedly.

"I don't believe you know one scrap more about clothes than I do!" she said at last. "We both of us look the limit. But after all, what does it matter? You are dowdy and I am crude, but we should worry!"

"Come on down or pa will be clawing the air," was her greeting.

She left me then to my unpacking and I did not see her again for about two hours. Then she stuck her head in abruptly, without knocking. "He certainly can eat, though I don't think much of the food in the East. You ought to see the meals in California!"

There was no resisting the young giantess. With no further ado she swung me along to the parlor, where her still more gigantic parent gave me an absent-minded greeting, quite as if I had been in his employ for years. He took a sheaf of papers to the table with him, and we descended to the dining room, I vaguely wondering whether or not the young chauffeur would join us. Peaches seemed to discern my thought.

[Pg 36]

"Dick won't eat with us since pa bought him that trick suit of clothes!" she complained. "And he says he actually likes wearing them, though I know perfectly well he only does it because he thinks it gives us class."

During luncheon Mr. Pegg spoke only once.

"All ready to sail to-morrow?" he inquired.

"Yep!" replied his daughter. "Say, pa," she went on, "Miss Talbot's got a cousin in Monte Carlo that's a honest-to-goodness countess!"

"Cable her we are coming!" said Silas Pegg truculently.

And though I believe that Mentone had been our original destination the cable was actually dispatched, though I wondered somewhat how Cousin Abby would receive it. In her girlhood she had been rather formal, and I entertained a qualm or two about sending it. But we were not asking to visit her, so things might not be too dreadful after all. Besides which, I was beginning to experience a distinct liking for these Californians with all their native crudities. My world was a magic one now, and a visit to the Veruchio household appeared no more strange than any other part of my adventure.

Next morning Alicia opened my door quite unceremoniously and disclosed herself clad in a nautical costume of blue serge with a sailor collar and a little white hat absurdly set upon her magnificent head.

"Heave ahoy!" she called cheerily. "We are about to sail the ocean blue! How do you like my pull-for-the-shore effect? Say, have you ever been on a boat? Is it anything as bad as a Pullman sleeper?"

"My dear, I have been on neither!" I protested.

"Gee, I hope the berths are longer!" she exclaimed. "They were built on the idea that none of the natives would want to leave California, I guess, and they were darn near right! So you've never been anywhere. Well, I had a hunch I'd be the one to do the chaperoning. Never mind, I'll show you the world. I have decided overnight that I really ought to take you in charge, and I'm not one to shirk my duty."

[Pg 37]

"Very well, my dear," said I. "But first may I suggest that a simple coat and skirt would be less conspicuous and quite as appropriate? Will you not change to it, if you have one?"

"All right; I will if you will smooth out those groups of curls," said Peaches, eyeing me critically.

"But I have worn them always!" I protested, shocked.

"Just the same, they are the limit!" she said stubbornly. "And so are those silk gloves. Come on, let me fix your hair! No—I have a bright idea. Let's have the girl that does hair here in the hotel fix you up. Come on, be a sport!"

I looked at myself in the mirror, and truth to tell my curled fringe did appear a trifle old-fashioned. But I refused, with thanks and dignity.

"Miss Peaches!" I said. "Your father engaged me as I am, and I feel it incumbent upon me to remain thus."

"Oh, all right!" said she, and strode out of the room. I fancied she was angry; but to my surprise, upon our departure she appeared clad in quite a lady-like tailored suit and a small hat.

"Oh, I know when somebody gives me a real tip," she said, though I hadn't spoken; and then, accompanied by a most stupendous array of luggage, including my own small trunk and valise, we set forth upon the most perilous journey of which I could conceive.

[Pg 38]

Indeed, indeed I was grateful throughout it for the thought that our minister, Mr. MacAdams, prayed so loudly for the safety of travelers by land and sea each Sunday, and that this was

Saturday, hence there would be but little delay between our departure and the weekly renewal of his petition. For we began our travels in no less a vehicle than a terrific red automobile driven by the irrepressible Richard, or Dick, Talbot, who greeted me cheerfully and somehow not actually disrespectfully as "Cousin Mary," which was not, of course, in any sense correct.

I entered the vehicle with much unuttered protest. I did not like motor vehicles and had indeed never entered one before, having always maintained their inelegance. My dear father kept horses, though it is true he died somewhat prior to the invention of automobiles. Nevertheless I took my seat beside Mr. Pegg in the rear, and concealed as best I might a terror which was not lessened when, stopping at the railway station, Talbot, the chauffeur, was dismissed to gather up some spare bags, and Peaches took the steering gear. The remainder of the ride is a blur in my memory, filled with a horrid realization that we upset an apple cart, or I thought we had, until looking backward I saw it miraculously intact; that we seemingly murdered two police officers, most certainly grazed a load of baled hay, and barely escaped collision with a dozen pedestrians. Yet at the conclusion of this momentous experience Mr. Pegg, who had calmly smoked a large cheroot during the trip, complimented his daughter upon her skill. I was beginning to understand their cryptic speech a little better or else I should not have comprehended.

[Pg 39]

"Some speed queen!" he remarked.

"One hoss or sixty, I should trouble which!" said she.

And then Talbot, the chauffeur, or Richard, as I determined to call him, reappeared, and together with a crowd of porters and other travelers we passed into the gloomy cavern of a covered dock and up a most precarious gangway into a ship which differed little upon first acquaintance from the great hotel we had just left, except that the apartments were rather smaller. I had once before taken a boat trip to Nantucket to see an old servant of ours who was ill, and the vessel which conveyed me was not in the least like the Gigantic. But the impression of the latter's resemblance to a hotel was presently removed from my mind. In point of fact everything was removed from not only my mind but from the other portions of my anatomy which delicacy prevents my dwelling on.

Suffice to state that the fact of our being in possession of the state apartments, the novelty of the compact arrangements, the excitement of the trip, the amazing crowds of strangers—all presently were as naught to me. Even my princely emolument was as nothing, and the sacrifice I had made for my sister appeared of no importance. Nothing appeared of any importance except the distress of my body. I longed most ardently for the stability of the house on Chestnut Street, and it seemed inconceivable that I had ever left my dear sister of my own free will. My idea of paradise became distorted from the true conception to a vision of any place other than that in which I was. Death, once so far removed from my desire, seemed the only tolerable condition. I may remark in passing that this state of mind did not develop in me until after the boat had passed Boston Light and encountered the waters of the Atlantic.

[Pg 40]

The account of my first impressions of a transatlantic voyage will never be written by me, as they contain material fit only for a *materia medica*. How people can take such a trip for pleasure is to me a mystery as insoluble as the fourth dimension, which was a favorite topic with my dear father. But incredible as it may seem, some persons on the boat actually laid claim to an enjoyable experience, and among these Spartans were my employer and his daughter; and also, by the latter's evidence, the chauffeur, who was traveling first class. Peaches came frequently to the side of my brass bedstead and bathed my forehead with cologne water the while she attempted to cheer me with an account of her doings.

"I told pa I'd have to look after you!" she said triumphantly. "And I will. Never mind, Miss Governess, I'll get you to Europe alive and show you the country. Couldn't you come on deck? It's a swell deck, and there's the nicest young man up there. We've got acquainted, and Dick is terribly jealous!"

"Alicia!" I managed to gasp. "Who is the young man?"

"I don't know!" she said truthfully. "I forgot to ask his name, but he's a regular sailor in good standing."

"Do you mean to say you've scraped acquaintance with a common sailor?" I said feebly. "Oh! Alicia! I fear I am neglecting my duty to you, and yet heaven knows I have no choice!"

"If you'd only get up and out you'd be better!" she pronounced. "And we might find a captain or a mate or something for you. Couldn't you eat a little steak and onions?" she added anxiously. "It would give you strength."

[Pg 41]

Later she returned and sat beside me with a look of rapture upon her face. I was in an exhausted state despite the herb tea which I had had made by the sea-going chambermaid from my own medicine cabinet, and taken with difficulty, yet I was calm enough for her speech to impress me.

"The moon is up," she said dreamily. "And the waves are like the Sierra Mountains gone mad and reeling drunkenly in their purple-and-black mystery, with the foam like the snows that the yellow sun never melts. The air is like wine. I am glad he kissed me."

"Oh, Peaches, Peaches! Who kissed you?" I moaned, struggling to my elbow in horror.

"Dick," she replied. "Somebody had to kiss somebody on a night like this, and it just happened to be us. Don't worry, it really isn't important. I never lose my head, though between ourselves I sometimes wish I could. When I do I'll marry the clever man. But I've never met him yet, and sometimes that makes me sad. I want to be in love. Really in love. Don't you?"

Despite my condition I could not but be attentive.

"I do not dwell upon such subjects," I replied.

"Oh, yes you do!" said Peaches imperturbably. "Everyone does! Even cows and birds and Chinese cooks. But some of us, like you, don't have much luck, and some, like me, have a trick played on them by Nature that ruins everything."

"How so, my dear?" I asked.

"I'm too tall!" said Peaches in a sudden burst of indignation at fate. "I'd have to lean over to spoon with anybody I ever met! My shoulder is the highest and therefore the handiest! My hand is generally the biggest! Oh, Lord! How can a girl love a man she has to bend down to kiss?"

[Pg 42]

And suddenly she rushed from the cabin, overcome with emotion, leaving me to sniff at a camphor bottle and contemplate an entirely new, to me, phase of feminine tragedy. And incidentally to feel more deeply a sense of the responsibility of my position toward this amazingly innocent, terrifyingly frank young savage, who wanted to be in love and did not hesitate to say so, and who kissed the chauffeur simply and solely because it was a moonlit night! I felt thoroughly convinced that Euphemia would not approve of any such conduct, and that my dear father would have condemned it utterly, and I made every effort to rise next day and finish out the voyage in close proximity to my charge.

But somehow or other the span of time had escaped me during my indisposition, and upon completing my toilet, with the aid of the young person who had brewed my herb tea, I learned to my astonishment that we were in port and that my ability to rise was founded, not, as I had fancied, in my having attained what is rather indelicately known as "sea legs," but was due to the fact of the boat being at a standstill. I only then realized that I had been ill for five days. Richard, the chauffeur, accompanied Peaches when she came to get me, and somehow or other they evolved me through the complications of the dock, and at last I stood upon foreign soil.

Not, of course, that the English are really foreigners, as my dear father often remarked. But I must confess that the soil of Liverpool felt quite foreign to me. It appeared, in fact, entirely unsteady and of a heaving disposition, more what one might have expected of the neighborhood of Vesuvius and the other earthquake countries. But Peaches only laughed at me when I called her attention to the circumstance.

[Pg 43]

"It's you that's unsteady, not the street!" she jeered. "Gee, what a town! What a country! They ought to see San Francisco! Why, we've done twice as well in half the time!"

I confess I was disappointed with what I saw of England, which was little enough, because Mr. Pegg stopped only long enough to pick up an English car, which had been ordered far in advance and was awaiting us at Liverpool. It was a monstrous affair of black trimmed with vermilion, and recalled to my mind nothing so much as the far-famed dragon which was slain by St. George—so strong and fierce and capable it looked. Richard, the chauffeur, almost wept at sight of it.

"Oh, baby doll!" he said over and over. "If that isn't some engine!"

"Some lug box!" remarked Peaches in that cryptic language in which she spoke to her families. "Must have set pa back a bushel of berries!"

"I want to hit the trail for the Calais boat!" said Mr. Pegg. "We aren't going to stay in England. There's no art in England. I had an English remittance man working for me once and he told me so. He says all the good art is in the Catholic countries, except what has been smuggled out of them. He told me so, and he was a educated feller. He educated me out of the entire pay roll one week, and is now working for the U. S. Government in San Quentin."

"But, Mr. Pegg!" I ventured to protest. "Think of Westminster Abbey and the Tower and Stratford-on-Avon, the home of Shakespere, and—and real English muffins and English culture generally. Surely you do not intend to deprive your daughter of it?"

[Pg 44]

"Not by a damn sight. Meaning no offense, Miss Talbot!" said Silas. "But the trouble is they all speak English over here, and we got enough Boston accent right on your person. I figure that foreign travel is foreign travel, and I mean we should go right to Rome, the home of art; and after we do it up thoroughly, work back along the coast where they speak in Italian and French. Somehow it's foreigner!"

There was no denying that, and disappointed as I was I held my peace. Mr. Pegg had a way of ordering our existence ahead, as if we were a part of his business. And indeed I presently ascertained that the plunge toward Italy was at bottom a commercial undertaking. It was the orange and olive groves, not the art galleries, that lured him.

"I'm thinking of forming an American-Italian olive crushers' association," he confided to me as we sped alarmingly along a toy road amidst scenes which I am sure would have proved quaint had we been going slowly enough to see them. "And an orange trust that will be a world-wide proposition. Oranges are a great little fruit—eat 'em, drink 'em and preserve 'em—the wood is swell. A great game, Miss Talbot, that hurts nobody and is of benefit to all. I'm to meet this here Pagreleri, the president of the Sorrento Company; and while Peaches and you trot round to the picture shows—I mean galleries—I'll put in a little sight seeing on God's green hills! I'd rather see the prospect of a hundred thousand vats of brine and oil than the finest picture any artist ever drew."

"Are we going to the Ritz, pa?" said Peaches, breaking in with a shout from her seat in front beside Richard. "I'm dying to see if the Ritz is as nice as the St. Francis, though I bet it won't be!"

[Pg 45]

"Yep!" said the parent, and began operations upon a new cigar. And that is all that I saw of London the historical. The dining room and the bedrooms of a hotel that had not twopennyworth of difference from that in Boston. We dined at seven in an almost empty salon, and went afterward to see a motion picture of some American by the name of Charles Chapin or something of the sort, an amazing affair centering about a custard pie and not at all to my taste. Mr. Pegg and Miss Peaches were enormously intrigued by it, as was Richard, the chauffeur, whom they insisted should accompany them. They laughed continuously; at what, I could not appreciate. And it was in this theater that we first beheld that young man who was fated to play so conspicuous part in our lives, and, alas, in the career of many a newspaper reporter as well!

It is my impression that I was the first to notice him, and my attention was directed to him by the curious behavior of two men who sat directly in front of me. Except for their observations concerning him he might easily have escaped my notice. But as the entertainment offered me was so far removed from my understanding my interest was focused upon the personnel of those members of the audience who chanced to be seated nearest me. My dear father was in the habit of saying that observation of the human race is the truest form of education and I have ever diligently tried to follow whatever precepts he laid down. And so this evening I had in turn observed a stout person in a beaded gown, a pair of young soldiers in red coats, and then the two men directly in front of me. They were unobtrusive in appearance, but palpably of Latin extraction. Their clothing was nondescript and they would have passed unnoticed in a crowd. One wore a little black mustache and the other bore a slight scar near his left ear. As I looked at them I perceived that they were giving even less attention to the picture than myself, and seemed to be furtively searching for something out in the vast area of semidarkness ahead of us. Suddenly one clutched the other by the arm and spoke.

[Pg 46]

"There he is!" he said in a low tone, speaking in French.

Instantly both became alert. Almost imperceptibly the man with the scar contrived to point without raising his hand. But I followed the direction of his companion's eyes, and made out the objective, a young man who sat on the curve of the orchestra seats just under the balcony, below us. His position was such that when he turned his head it was possible to see his profile against the exit light beyond. And it was a profile one would not easily forget. I at once thought of Romeo—that daring young Italian lover who met so unfortunate an end, and whose tragic story was one of the secret absorptions of my girlhood. Yet this young man even in the dimness of the theater conveyed a sense of strength which had not been convincing to me in the actor whom I had once seen in that part. He sat well above his neighbors in height, and there was a certain swing and rhythm to his broad shoulders as he swayed with amusement at the projection of the cinematograph that conveyed remarkable resiliency and buoyant youth or, as I fear my charge would express it, "pep." He was a gentleman, I could see that, of unusual elegance, and attractive enough to command my attention without what followed on the part of the two other observers. Both spoke in French.

[Pg 47]

"Sapristi! He will not escape this time!" said the man with the mustache, pitching his voice very low. "The eel!"

"Will you do for him at the door?" whispered the other. "Or as he attempts to reach the hotel?"

"I have something better than that," said the first. "We know he has it on him. The hotel may be too late. He must not get to the theater door before we do—or else——"

I heard no more because of the sudden palpitations of my heart, which seemed likely to smother me. These two men were plainly robbers planning to waylay and perhaps murder that nice-looking young man who sat there in such innocent, unconscious enjoyment of the photographic antics of the Charley person! It was too terrible!

How could I warn him? Should I attempt to explain the situation to the competent Mr. Pegg and the muscular Richard? That would be impossible of accomplishment without also precipitating matters with the conspirators, who would surely overhear me. As I was rapidly revolving these thoughts action was violently put upon me. The picture flashed "The End," and the young man whose life was in danger rose to leave, as did several others. His seat, as I have stated, was downstairs, while we occupied a box. Thus he was far nearer the door than were we. As he rose, so did the Frenchmen in front of me. In order to make their exit it was necessary for them to pass my seat, which was a step above them. As they turned to come up I rose with a little cry and took the only course open.

[Pg 48]

I fainted most dexterously, knocking down one of them and collapsing upon the bosom of the other, and lay there in a determined stupor until, according to my calculations, the young man must be quite well away. The confusion was dreadful and it was no pleasant matter fainting by intent upon the bosom of an intended assassin, but it served to delay them for all of ten minutes, at the end of which time I came to under the anxious ministrations of my own people and of the two foreigners, whom Peaches, an unconscious accessory, pressed into active service much against their will. And my apparent accident served a double purpose, thus proving my dear father's maxim that virtue is its own reward, for it disclosed the fact that I had made a real impression upon the emotional side of my charge.

"Oh, Free, you dear old thing!" she was saying as I opened my eyes. "Say you are not hurt! Dear—please say you are all right!"

"I feel dreadfully!" I murmured feebly, looking her right in the eye.

And then I did something which, having been reared a gentlewoman, I had never anticipated

doing. I deliberately winked at her. And Peaches took it marvelously. In a flash of understanding that I had some ulterior motive behind my behavior she maintained what she calls her poker face and winked back, and, assisting me in what she now knew to be my pretense, helped me to a cab and back to the hotel.

Needless to say, however, I was not permitted to sleep that night until she had the whole story from me. She came into my chamber with her heavy hair hanging over her shoulders in two monstrous braids of molten gold, and swathed in an outrageous robe of crimson-and-blue satin so that she looked like a magnificent animated American flag. She curled up upon the foot of my bed and listened eagerly.

[Pg 49]

"You wild Indian!" she exclaimed when I had finished the recital. "I just knew I'd have to look after you! And I'll keep a closer watch from now on. Oh you Boston! California was never like this."

In which she was eminently correct. But when she kissed me good night I knew our friendship was sealed. The wink had done it.

Next morning we set out for Dover in that terrible car, without having heard or seen anything of our hero. I confess I had absurdly hoped that the hotel to which the conspirators had referred might prove to be ours, but it was impossible to know if or not this was the case, as, of course, we had no idea of what his name was, and he was nowhere about.

The newspaper naturally contained no mention of the incident inasmuch as it had failed actually to occur, and the press is, of course, unlikely to have any mention of a murder unless the crime is consummated. And so it appeared that the incident was closed. I had begged Peaches not to speak of its true import to either her father or her friend the chauffeur, and this she solemnly promised.

"Oh, but Free!" she exclaimed rapturously. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if you met again and fell in love!"

"Nonsense!" said I. "Why, he was young enough to have been my son! Besides, I shall never marry!"

"That's the girl!" said Peaches. "They all say that just before the big event. So cheer up, who knows their luck? Gee, I wish I could see him!"

[Pg 50]

And there was surely something prophetic in her speech, for Peaches was fated to see him, though not for many hours afterward. And then she found him for herself.

As I have stated, we set forth in that monstrous car for Dover, where we embarked, car and all, upon an innocent-appearing little boat for what was promised as a short journey. Possibly it was. I do not remember. I only know that nothing in my previous nautical experience compared with it. And when at last we landed and I had to some degree recovered my equilibrium the most startling incident occurred. We once again were seated, Mr. Pegg, Peaches and myself, in the car, ready to leave the custom house behind us, and Richard, the chauffeur, was doing strange things to the motor, when suddenly Alicia seized me by the arm.

"Free! Oh, Free!" she said in an excited whisper. "There is a man tall enough for me!"

I looked, and lo and behold, walking through the crowd in a leisurely fashion, a smart piece of luggage in either hand, was the young man of the motion-picture theater. At the same moment I discerned the two Frenchmen whose plot I had frustrated, and on the instant he also caught sight of them, and abruptly changing his course he turned directly toward us. Richard got in and started the engine.

"It's he!" I exclaimed excitedly. "It's my young man. Oh, the villains! They are after him again! Oh, don't let them get him!"

"I won't," said Alicia promptly.

The young man was very close now, palpably, to our enlightened eyes, endeavoring to avoid the appearance of flight. The two men in pursuit were gaining on him rapidly. Suddenly Alicia beckoned to him and called.

[Pg 51]

"Here we are!" she said, and flung open the door of the car just as we started to move. The young man sprang forward, threw in his bags, slipped into the extra seat, slammed the door, and Peaches touched Richard upon the shoulder.

"Drive for your life!" she shouted, and the big black car shot down the street just as the two pursuers emerged, breathless, from the crowd.

IV

[Pg 52]

The young man whom Alicia had hailed turned toward her with quite the nicest smile it had ever been my fortune to behold, a smile in which his white teeth, which were of a character to do any dentist credit, were the least important factor, beautiful as they were. It was the way his face lighted up which caught one. In any situation that smile would prove his shield and buckler. It would have been invaluable to a book agent, and a missionary would have needed no other credentials—at least certainly not on our street at home. We all smiled back at him instinctively,

though it was to Alicia that he spoke.

"It was simply ripping of you people!" he said in excellent English and a delightfully modulated voice, yet with a curious intonation, as if it were not his native tongue.

"Not at all!" replied Peaches, her eyes holding his. "Glad to oblige you!"

He seemed a trifle blank at this.

"I didn't expect you to be here," he went on. "But I think it's awfully jolly. I suppose you motor a great deal, Lady Gordon!"

"Lady who?" gasped Peaches. "Gee-whiz! Who do you think we are?"

"Great Scott!" said the inadvertent guest. "Aren't you Lord and Lady Gordon?"

"Lord and Lady me eye!" remarked Peaches. "We are not!"

"Then why on earth did you call to me?" exclaimed the young man. "And who are you?"

[Pg 53]

Just then the Citrus King leaned forward and shouted a query against the wind.

"Who is your young man, Peaches?" he said. "Make me acquainted."

"I don't know who he is!" snapped his daughter. "Who are you yourself?" she demanded of him. "I am a low-life American bourgeois in trade and every bally thing—name of Alicia Pegg; and this is my father, Pinto Pegg, the Citrus King, and this is my chaperon, Miss Talbot, that I'm taking abroad to educate. Now who are you?"

"My name is Sandro di Monteventi," he said, getting out a little gold cardcase, from which he extricated a visiting card bearing a five-pointed coronet and the inscription Monteventi. A duke! As I glimpsed the card, which with proper breeding he handed first to me, I nearly fainted. We must have made a mistake somehow. Yet he was undoubtedly the young man of the theater. I could not have made so monstrous an error. As for Peaches, when I handed it on to her she simply gave a frank stare and a long whistle.

"Pleased to meet you, duke!" she said. "I guess we may have made a mistake. We thought—well, we thought you were a friend of ours—but I don't quite see how you fell for it. Dicky, turn round and take the gentleman back!"

"No, no!" said the duke hastily. "That is, you are going my way, so if you don't mind—my friends will be gone by now!"

"Certainly. Keep ahead, Dick!" said Pinto heartily. "Pleased to have a duke along. That's what we came to Europe for, you know—like all vulgar Americans. So we'll drop you any place you say."

[Pg 54]

"That's really frightfully kind, Mr. Pegg," said the duke. "You see, I am expected to visit the Gordons, who have rented a château at Deux Arbres and when you called, Miss Pegg, I thought they had come to meet me. We shall pass there shortly, and if you will just set me down in the village I shall be all right and fearfully grateful."

"Why, that's the place where the famous panels by Scarpia are!" I exclaimed. "They were painted at the order of Cardinal Perigino in 1754."

The duke looked at me in some surprise.

"Right!" said he. "Do you know the Gordons, by any chance?"

"No," I replied. "But I know my Burke's History of the Sixteenth Century Italian Painters."

"Oh!" said he. "How odd and delightful." And he smiled again that delectable smile of his, which somehow drew us into a delicious intimacy. His smile seemed at once to compliment my erudition and a thousand other lovely things. Then he turned again to Peaches and looking at her spoke to her father.

"Where are you bound for, sir?" he asked.

"Monte Carlo will be our final camp," said Silas. "It's a town I've always wanted to hit. I understand it's got it all over Hell River or even Dogtown, and I used to get a lot of comfort out of them two places when I was herding hop pickers round the head of the Sacramento Valley. But I understand Monte has them beaten three ways. It ought to, considering the game they named after it!"

I am convinced that this statement was as unintelligible to the duke as it was to me, but he laughed politely.

[Pg 55]

"I may be dropping down there a little later," he said. "In point of fact my home is not far from it—lovely old place back in the hills. I was born there!"

"That so?" said Mr. Pegg. "Well, you do talk English remarkably well!"

"I was educated at Harvard," said the duke. "My mother was an American, the daughter of the consul at San Remo."

"I knew you were a regular guy!" said Peaches, and then blushed furiously. The duke laughed.

"Thanks!" said he. "But I am an Italian, you know, really, and I love my country—as perhaps few men have!"

His eyes grew grave as he spoke. And after a few moments of curious silence that fell upon us unwittingly, he held up his hand as a signal to stop.

"We are coming into Deux Arbres now," he said. "There is the inn, and that trap looks as if it would take one to the château! I am a thousand times grateful for the lift!"

The car slowed down at Alicia's command, and the duke, despite our protests, insisted upon getting out.

"We could easily take you right to the ranch house—castle, that is!" Peaches offered.

"Not a bit more trouble, young man!" said Mr. Pegg.

But the duke would have no more of us. Charmingly, politely and firmly he shook us, as Alicia put it afterward. He disappeared within a little hostelry and we resumed our journey. When we had done so Alicia's father subjected her to a cross examination which I, rather than she, deserved, inasmuch as I had really been responsible for the more or less shocking performance. But Peaches nobly refrained from in any way implicating me.

[Pg 56]

"Look here, Peaches, what made you collect that young swell?" said her parent in an attempt to be properly irate.

"Why, pa, I thought it was Jake Keeting—you know, Giant Jake from the B-2 outfit, and I was so surprised I yelled before I thought," she lied with alarmingly casual promptness.

"Well, it's a good thing I and Miss Talbot was along to make it look respectable!" he boomed. "This isn't the coast, you know, and people round here have old-fashioned notions. But he seemed a mighty nice young feller."

Alicia glanced sideways at Richard, the chauffeur.

"I thought he was a wonder!" she said deliberately. And then no more.

That night, in the luxurious bedroom at the Ritz in Paris, which was precisely like all the other hotels at which we had stopped so far, Peaches and I discussed the mystery of the Ducca di Monteventi to our heart's content. And in the end we tacitly cleared him of connection with the incident of the London theater, Alicia insisting that I must have been mistaken in my identification of him, and I determinedly convinced that he was none other than the hero of my escapade, an opinion to which I privately held, though I refrained from expressing it when I discovered that she disliked the thought.

"Say!" she remarked. "I think he's a prince, that's what. You know what I mean—he's a duke, of course, but I should worry about that! I mean a prince in the American sense."

And curiously enough I understood her.

[Pg 57]

But fate removed the object of our interest from our lives for many weeks to come. We moved rather more slowly than I had anticipated, owing partially to Alicia's sudden interest in Parisian art galleries. We would plan our trip for the day within earshot of her parent, and in truth we did occasionally visit them as we had announced. But more frequently when we said we would go to the Louvre we meant the emporium of that title, and very shortly Peaches' wardrobe began to show the results of my restraining influence.

She was so beautiful that everything she put on became her, and so tall that everything had to be altered. And so it came about that we were some weeks in Paris; very pleasurable they were, too, and my knowledge of French came in most serviceably. Not for nothing had I taken a prize at Miss Hichbourne's Seminary and Finishing School for Young Gentlewomen with an essay entitled *Un Matin de Mai*, for it developed that I was the only person in our party possessed of even the rudiments of any foreign language, and I was constantly in demand as interpreter, requesting everything from *un verre de L'eau glacée* for Mr. Pegg to *tabac et d'allumettes* for Richard, the chauffeur, and, of course, in the purchasing of Peaches' clothes I was indispensable.

Moreover, out of my princely emolument I felt it but right to purchase for myself sundry garments of a more fashionable appearance than I had hitherto possessed, and to dispatch home by boat mail an embroidered shawl for my sister and some fine cambric handkerchiefs together with a pair of blue worsted knitted slippers for Galadia, which I purchased at the American Woman's Exchange.

[Pg 58]

I may here remark in passing that Alicia's speech and manner were becoming gradually modified under my earnest example and tuition, though her fiery spirit and impulsive nature remained the same. Also her conduct was impeccable, for with the exception of bringing home a perfectly strange young American sailor—a common seaman, he was—to dinner for no better reason than that she had found him sitting in the Jardin de Tuileries and he had professed to be homesick, she did nothing remarkable. It is a fact that upon one occasion she was barely prevented from using physical violence upon the driver of a fiacre, who she maintained was a dog-faced son of a muleteer and was ripe for admission to the nether world, his inevitable landing place. And all this because he was using a whip with more violence than discrimination upon his apathetic animal. Her extraordinary language was completely, and very fortunately, lost upon him, inasmuch as he understood no English, much less Californian, and thought she was merely trying to protest at the overcharge, and being used to that he remained undisturbed.

During our stay in Paris I wrote to and received an answer from my Cousin Abby, who in a dashing hand announced that she would be "charmed to see you, dear old thing, as it's a beastly season, dull as ditch water, and anything will be a diversion."

I announced the fact of the receipt of this letter but kept its exact contents to myself, as I rather feared for our reception. Mr. Pegg, however, seemed to consider the mere fact of her reply an encouraging sign, and with his customary abruptness of decision gave orders that we pack up at

[Pg 59]

once and proceed to Italy by train instead of by motor as we had planned, thus expediting the matter of starting upon what he persisted in terming the "commencement of Peaches' social career."

"Since your cousin, the countess, is at her castle," he informed me, "we will break camp right now, Miss Talbot, and hit the trail for the Italian citrus country. I am anxious to start looking the lemon situation over, and it's only fair to give the Paris shops a chance to restock. So to-morrow we will pull out."

"Very well, Mr. Pegg," I assented. "Though it is a pity to miss the château country."

"Not much sense in looking at the outside of châteaux if you don't know the folks living in them," the Citrus King commented. "And perhaps on the way back we will have a few invites from your cousin's friends."

I could only bite my lip and refrain from going into the question further at the moment. Mr. Pegg's social and geographical ideas were at that time in sad need of correction. But then correction made so little impression on him. If his mind was made up to get a thing he would brush aside all else until the attainment of his object. Already I was learning not to dispute his decisions. Besides, it was conceivable that Cousin Abby did know some French nobility, or the lessees of some, and that if she accepted us at all we might possibly make their acquaintance in due course. Indeed the circumstances were far less improbable than so much which had actually occurred during the past month that I dismissed the question momentarily, wrote Euphemia a brief note informing her of our prospective change of address, and then sought out my charge for the purpose of imparting her father's instructions.

[Pg 60]

At first I experienced some difficulty in locating her, but after a diligent search of our sumptuous suite I at length discovered her in the public corridor near the elevator, where she was engaged in explaining some game of cards—a form of solitaire—to the youth who operated the elevator. They were seated upon a bench near the shaft, and the youth was completely negligent of his duty. At my approach Miss Alicia looked up and nodded, but continued her explanation.

"The jack on the queen," she was saying; "the ten on the jack; move 'em over—that makes a dollar you owe me!"

"Alicia!" I exclaimed. "Stop it at once! What are you doing?"

"Canfield," she replied mysteriously. "Want to take me on?" She gathered up the cards, which I then discovered to be part of what I may term her personal equipment, being small and easily contained in that part of her vanity case usually occupied by rouge and lip stick, for which, thank heaven, Alicia had neither need nor desire, though perhaps when one stops to consider the matter it is somewhat doubtful if her substitution of a pack of playing cards had a greater moral value.

"I don't want to take you on; I want to take you away!" I said. "Come back to the apartment and pack. We are to proceed to Monte Carlo in the morning.

"Suffering cats!" exclaimed Peaches. "No wonder you don't want to stop for any of this piker stuff." Then she turned to the elevator boy, who still lingered, seemingly in a state of semihypnosis. "Thanks for the paper, captain," she said. "Keep that dollar you owe me for a tip!" And then she slid her arm around my neck and strolled down the corridor with me, while the youth, with a parting grin, at length perceived the buzzing of the indicator, and vanished into his elevator contraption, not having uttered a single word since my advent.

[Pg 61]

"I had him try to find me a San Francisco paper," Peaches explained as we returned to our royal apartments. "I get so sick of these Frenchy ones that I can't read, and of the London ones that have only news which could never have been fresh to me. I wanted to see a good comic sheet. Gee! How we used to rush for 'em out on the ranch. When Bill Hovey's mule team came into sight over Bear Ridge Dick and I used to commence matching for who'd open the bag. And generally we'd look at the comics together. Don't you love Krazy-Kat?"

I shook my head slowly, more in despair at her simplicity than as the negative she took the gesture for.

"Well, you wouldn't, no, nor Buster Brown, either, I suppose. But we didn't have any volumes of Webster or any such light stuff on the ranch, and had to take what we could get."

"You have a newspaper of some sort, I see," I replied, feeling it useless to explain that I preferred Byron to Webster, and not feeling in the least convinced that Peaches knew of the existence of Daniel as well as of Noah. She pulled out a copy of the Paris *Herald* from under her arm.

"Not from the coast," she said, "but at least it's printed in American. The boy was a nice kid. He comes from Texas. He showed me a peach of a trick, and I was showing him a new Canfield when you breezed in with something really big. Hello! Here's something about Mr. Markheim!"

[Pg 62]

She had been scanning the front page of the paper as she talked, and now she fell silent for a moment as she read.

"Who is Mr. Markheim?" I inquired. "Not Sebastian Markheim, the great banker?"

"Yeah!" said Peaches assentingly. "But it's nothing much. He's bought another picture, that's all. And paid the price of a couple of first-class orange-groves for it."

"Why, Alicia Pegg!" I exclaimed. "What an extraordinary young female you are! Sebastian Markheim is one of the greatest collectors of antique paintings in the world. He is an authority on

the subject. How do you come to know him?"

"He came to know us!" she averred cheerfully. "Bought a ranch near our home outfit, and came over to get some pointers from pa. We see him a lot whenever he's in California."

"How amazing!" I exclaimed. "Sebastian Markheim, the great millionaire! What manner of man is he, Alicia?"

"Oh, he's a widower of about fifty or so," she said carelessly. "He's in love with me."

"Alicia!" I exclaimed. "Can you never learn to be more reticent about these—these delicate personal matters?"

"He isn't a bit delicate!" she responded mildly. "In fact he's awfully rough. He hounds me, but I can look out for myself."

I felt the subject too dangerous to pursue. As my dear father used to say, most unpleasant subjects thrive on reproof. So I diverted her attention from her immediate theme.

[Pg 63]

"What picture did he purchase that is worthy of such comment?" I inquired.

"It is called the Madonna of the Lamp by some bird named Raphael, last name not mentioned," replied the young heathen cheerfully. "What's all this about Monte Carlo to-morrow?"

But I had taken the newspaper from her.

"The Madonna of the Lamp!" I exclaimed. "Why, Alicia, child, that is one of the most famous paintings in the world. It was done in Italy, hundreds of years ago, by one of the greatest artists that ever lived. The extraordinary part of such a sale is that any private individual should own it. Its proper place is a museum. I am surprised it ever got out of Italy. They have a strict law which prohibits any important works of art from being taken out of the country, you know."

"I do not know," said Alicia. "But you'd think they'd be glad to get such a price for a thing as old as that, wouldn't you? Now if it was an original by Gibson or Christy——"

But I did not attend to the remainder of her sentence. My eye had fallen upon another item of even greater importance, which had evidently escaped her attention. It was small and inconspicuously placed, but its interest was overwhelming. It ran thus. I copy from the original:

Scarpia Panels Stolen

"Calais, March 15th. The commissioner of police here was informed last night that the four famous panels by Scarpia had been mysteriously removed from the château belonging to Baron Richt at Deux Arbres, seventeen miles from this city. The house has been rented to Lord and Lady Ellis Gordon for the past two years. The uttermost mystery surrounds the disappearance of the four panels, which have been one of the show features of the place. How the panels could disappear in the brief interval between the announcement of dinner and the return of the guests to the drawing-room is one of the most baffling features of the case. The fact of the theft was discovered by one of the house guests, the Ducca di Monteventi. Every effort will be made to discover the criminals, for whose capture Lord Gordon has already offered a large reward."

[Pg 64]

That was all, but as Peaches put it, it was "an eyeful." In other words, it was sufficient. Or almost so, for, of course, our native feminine curiosity was enormously piqued. We stared at each other in amazement for a moment, and then Peaches heaved a long sigh.

"That tall man!" she said cryptically. "Why, it was the place we left him at; the Gordon outfit! It seems like every time we hear of him he's mixed up in a mystery."

"It certainly does," I assented. "And here we are headed for the Riviera, while I don't suppose he will get away, now that he's mixed up with that theft."

"How do you know he's mixed up with it?" demanded Alicia with quite unnecessary violence. "He—he's a corker—couldn't you tell? Mixed up, my eye!"

"I meant as a witness or in some similar capacity," I protested. "If he were not a duke, Alicia, I should be inclined, upon mature consideration, to believe him a detective."

"Secret service?" she said doubtfully. "Sleuth? Why, no. He's a swell, that's all. You mustn't let your girlish imagination run away with you, Free. And anyhow, why worry, as we probably'll never see him again?"

[Pg 65]

"That is probably too true," I assented. Then I consulted dear father's chronometer, discovered that time was pressing, and proceeded to the packing of my bags and the problem of getting into my trunk some new materials which I had purchased with the intention of having Miss Stimpson, our local seamstress, make them up for me the very minute we returned to Boston. I had also a new coat which Alicia had insisted upon presenting to me, and some garments of a more private nature which I had secretly purchased to gaze upon occasionally, though I would never wear such unladylike garments, for suppose there were to be a train wreck, how would one explain that a pink satin ah—er—interior was not belying a respectable alpaca surface, if you divine my meaning?

Well, at any rate, I found that my small trunk could not possibly be made to hold all these new possessions, and so packed a few substantial petticoats with handmade crochet edging and my second-best dolman into a paper parcel, which I addressed to Euphemia and having thus

V

[Pg 66]

My dear father used justly to observe that clothes made the man, but that woman made the clothes. A witticism of which he was most fond, inasmuch as he clung to the custom of employing a tailoress, which was the almost universal method of procuring outer garments in his early youth. But it is possible that he intended to imply that the beauty of some females was insurmountable by bad taste in dress. I hardly know which interpretation may be correct; but I am sure that either Cousin Abby was tremendously affected by her clothes or that they were tremendously affected by her. At any rate they were as amazing as she was, or she as they, if you comprehend me. And the reaction which I experienced upon first beholding the Eiffel Tower was as nothing beside that incident to my first meeting in twenty-five years with my relative.

It took place almost immediately after our arrival at Monte Carlo. Indeed we were scarcely settled in the royal suite of the hotel before she paid her visit. Mr. Pegg and his daughter had stepped out to undergo the preliminaries of obtaining a card to the public gambling hell, and I, unwilling to countenance their project, had remained behind ostensibly to supervise Richard, the chauffeur, in the disposal of our things, and so was alone when the countess was announced.

The Richard person admitted her and came in whistling under his breath as he gave me her card.

"Oh, you beautiful doll!" he sang sotto voce as he did so.

[Pg 67]

I flew to the mirror, gave my hair a pat, and assuming a dignified deportment entered the drawing-room. It was empty save for a young girl, very much overdressed, who was standing with her back toward me, looking out of the window. At sound of my entrance she turned and pounced upon me with a shriek of delight.

"Freedom Talbot, old thing!" she exclaimed. "How glad I am to see you!"

And sure enough, that young girl was Cousin Abby! How true it is that the troubles we experience are seldom those we expect! I had been living in dread lest my titled relative should not prove hospitably inclined, and here she was already, upon the very first day of our arrival, greeting me literally with open arms. So much for the trouble I anticipated—it was gone like a wreath of smoke! But as I took a good look at her an entirely unforeseen difficulty began to force itself upon me. That Cousin Abby was willing to receive us was apparent, but were we going to return the compliment? For Abby had changed far more than I had.

When she left Boston twenty-five years ago Abby Talbot had been considerably older than I. But upon renewing her acquaintance as described I found her to be at least twenty years my junior. Not literally, you will understand, by some miracle of arrested growth or phenomenon in the actual defeat of time, but by sundry artificial aids such as were never countenanced by my dear father and mother, or indeed by Euphemia or myself, all such so-called aids to beauty being unknown to the gentlewomen of our acquaintance and recognized only upon the persons of outcast females and constituting the outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual disgrace. Of course it must be admitted that some of even Boston's very best people, particularly in the younger generation, where it was palpably unnecessary, resorted to these artifices, and I had several times been shocked at large receptions by observing this fact. But that a member of our family should stoop to such a course was incredible; or would have been except that I was at that moment beholding it with my own eyes.

[Pg 68]

Abby's hair was golden, and her cheeks were pink as Peaches' own. Her lips! Gracious goodness! I trembled for her immortal soul as I beheld them! And sinful-looking diamonds dangled from her ears almost to her shoulders. The hat she wore might better have been fashioned for a maid of sixteen, and her short gown swung above a pair of slim silken ankles and slippers with glittering buckles and outrageous heels.

But though I struggled to experience the disapproval which I knew to be the proper reaction to these bedizenments I could not but admire the brave spirit they also undoubtedly represented. There was that about Abby which gave one the belief that one need not grow old except through lack of the desire for youth. She seemed to stand there before me with the spirit of her unconquerable youth radiating, as it were, through the painted shell she had put upon her body. I at once, and for the first time in my life, seriously contemplated abandoning my curled fringe. All this which I have recorded passed through my mind in a flash—while she was embracing me, to be exact. Then she withdrew her perfumed person a few inches and laughed like a girl!

"Free, you duckie!" she cried. "You haven't changed a bit. It's fearfully amusing, your coming over. And to this iniquitous spot! How is poor dear Boston? I feel a million æons away from it! And how is Cousin Euphemia? And the dog—what was his name; Rex?—that she used to fuss over so when he got his feet wet, do you remember?"

[Pg 69]

She meant that she was trying to remember.

"Rex has departed this life," I replied, "on the initiative of a very rude and heartless dog catcher with a barred wagon. Euphemia is well except for her rheumatism and asthma and indigestion; or was when I left home."

"Doesn't she write?" asked Abby quickly.

"She was exceedingly disapproving of my enterprise and has not written," said I. "But I had somewhat anticipated the circumstance and am not unduly worried. The maid, Galadia, is to inform me should anything go wrong."

Abby laughed again. It certainly was a pleasant thing to hear.

"Tell me everything!" she exclaimed, drawing two chairs close together. "What on earth made you do it, you rebel? And who are these Peggs you are with?"

It was delightfully gossipy. I sat down beside her and soon explained my action, in reply to her first question. But when I came to enlarging upon the second, I found myself, most unexpectedly, at a loss. What was my relationship to them anyhow? It was like trying to analyze one's relationship to the sunlight. And yet, had I merely seen them without knowing them, I should have unquestionably characterized them as impossibly vulgar; that was the plain truth of the matter. To Abby they must inevitably seem so at first glance. And knowing this I instinctively rose to their defense. I discovered within myself a sudden warm glow of affection and appreciation which was so normal and comfortable in its character that I had positively been unaware of its existence until criticism threatened them. I spoke slowly and deliberately, choosing my words with care.

[Pg 70]

"The Peggs are Americans," said I, "from California. And their hearts are as big as their—er—oranges."

"From which I gather they are millionaires and vulgar," said Abby shrewdly—"but that you like them."

"I do indeed!" said I, though how she deduced so much from my remark I cannot imagine.

"And it is equally evident," Abby went on, "that I, your titled cousin, am to be induced by hook or crook to introduce them to an assortment of foreign titles. That's so, isn't it? And you are in an agony of embarrassed bewilderment about how to broach the subject?"

"Abby!" I gasped. "How can you!"

"My dear, I have to!" she cut in, laughing again, though not so pleasantly this time. "My wits are about all I have with which to make good my bridge losses! I suppose you know Constantine left me nothing but the villa?"

"What!" I exclaimed, really aghast. "I was not even aware of your husband's demise!"

"Polo accident," she said briefly. "Five years ago."

"I'm sorry," I said softly.

"Well," said Abby, "never mind that! So you see you need have no reticence about offering me money. I can earn it, I assure you."

Of course this was astonishing, but at the same time it really was an immense relief. For I knew dear Mr. Pegg never hesitated to pay a proper price for the genuine article, as he himself was wont to put it. And I had in truth been most anxious as to how I should approach my distinguished relative upon so delicate a matter as remuneration for the peculiar services which we required. And so, though in a sense I was shocked by her frankness, it made my path far easier, particularly since her own lack of delicacy in the matter warranted a larger degree of outspokenness upon my part. And I had something important to say. Her opening gave me an opportunity not likely of renewal, and so I at once rushed into the breach.

[Pg 71]

"My dear, I grieve for your loss," said I; "and for the unfortunate condition of your widowhood. And it is a most happy circumstance that we can be of benefit to each other at this time. Mr. Pegg intends to offer you a thousand dollars each for introductions to titles. And a bonus, I think he called it, of ten thousand dollars for—er—I believe he termed it 'working capital.'"

"Splendid!" exclaimed Abby. "Now go ahead and tell me the buts."

"The buts?" I queried. "Do you infer that there are restrictions to Mr. Pegg's offer?"

"By the gleam in your eye I know there are!" Abby affirmed.

"Well," I admitted, "Mr. Pegg has not expressed his desire that there be any; but I have one of my own."

Abby gave me a most peculiar look at this, her eyes narrowing and her lips curling in a distinctly unpleasant smile. It filled me with an acute, though undefined, sense of discomfort.

[Pg 72]

"Very well," she said quietly. "How much do you want?"

"What?" I asked.

"What commission do you want?" said she, speaking very distinctly. I felt as though someone had struck me with a whip. Instinctively I got to my feet.

"Abby!" I exclaimed in horror. "A bribe! How could you? A Talbot!"

To my amazement and further distress she stared at me for a long moment and then burst into tears.

"Forgive me, Cousin Free!" she sobbed. "Forgive me, if you can—please! One gets so hard, so used to things like that out here! I ought to have known better! Please say you understand!"

She was not like a little girl any longer. There was something behind the tone in which she spoke which frightened me; something terrible and sinister and cruel—something which could break

even a Talbot! I perceived its nature though its substance was beyond my experience, and at once the instinct to rescue and help her was uppermost in my mind. I fussed over her much as I used to fuss over Rex, our pet, when anything ailed him, for he had been my dog, not Euphemia's, as Abby had supposed. And presently she grew quieter, though she still held on to my hand. But though I felt sorry for Abby and was determined to be of assistance to her I did not let the most unfortunate incident divert me from what had originally been in my mind to say when she made her terrible mistake.

"Now, my dear, I will forgive you," said I. "But please brace up and allow me to state my condition, which is simply this: The young lady, Miss Alicia Pegg, must be most carefully guarded from fortune hunters and all questionable company. You must guarantee to me that you will introduce her to no one who can harm her. Her father has a faith in her ability to take care of herself which is founded in his knowledge of her singularly beautiful nature, but he is almost as unworldly in our sense as she is. I simply won't have any scallawags hanging round her. Her father trusts me to look out for her welfare, and I mean to see that his trust is justified."

[Pg 73]

"You seem pretty deep in his confidence," Abby remarked. "He is a widower, you said?"

"He is," I replied, though I did not see what that had to do with the subject. "And Alicia's motherless condition places a great responsibility upon me. So you must promise what I have asked, Abby, and keep the promise faithfully."

"All right, old dear!" she answered, her self-possession rapidly returning. "And it won't be hard, for I know an awfully decent set, really. I'll have you all out to dine this very week. I'm at San Remo, you know. Just a short motor drive from here; a duck of a house opposite the old German Emperor's place. How about Saturday? That ought to give me time to collect the proper people."

"That will be lovely, Abby!" said I. "Mr. Pegg will be delighted, I am sure." Then a sudden wonderment struck me.

"Don't you ever wish you were back in the security of your life in Boston?" I asked curiously.

"Not when I'm sane!" she replied lightly. "Do you?"

This was both unexpected and disconcerting. But I strove to be honest in my reply.

[Pg 74]

"No," I said; "I cannot truthfully say that I do."

And long after she had taken her departure, buoyant and apparently light-hearted once more, I pondered my reply. But I found no explanation for my change of heart. Never, no, never, did I expect to utter such a sentiment, much less to have felt it! But the harsh fact was that I had somehow become estranged from my native city and the human element which represented it, and did in truth already prefer the Riviera.

In point of fact it appeared to me to be the most beautiful place of which the mind could conceive, despite that I was rather surprised to find the chief foliage to be cedar and other evergreens, and that the whole effect was less tropical than I had imagined. Also I had expected that the natives would be rather more like those in a production of *Cavalleria Rusticana*, to which my dear father had once escorted Euphemia and myself upon the occasion of her birthday; and even after several weeks of continuous residence in Monte Carlo I was unable to be rid of a feeling that the management, or rather government, was somehow to blame for not making the reality more like the opera.

But oh, how beautiful it was! I was unstinting in my praise. Not so Mr. Pegg and Alicia, however.

"Pretty good!" was Alicia's comment. "But you ought to see California. They'd better bring over some of our poppies to liven up the hills."

"It's real pretty," her father admitted, "but awful small. It's something like a pocket edition, as you might say, Miss Free."

"I scarcely believe that anything could be more lovely," I declared.

"Well, of course you haven't been West yet," said Peaches cheerfully. "Then you'll see the real thing!"

[Pg 75]

"I shall never become a Californian, my dear," I put in mildly. "Do you know, sometimes I fear you tend to exaggerate in describing your native State?"

"Well, we produce the biggest crops in the world," she declared. "So why not the biggest liars, as well? Wait until you've been out on the coast yourself!"

And never to this day have I clearly understood what she meant by that. A great deal that Alicia said was difficult to understand. And nothing was more so than this insistence on her part that anything Californian was superior to everything European. After our visit to the Villa d'Este I gave up. She looked it over pleasantly and gave her verdict.

"I guess they copied it from the Gillespie place at Santa Barbara," she said; "only, of course, these hills are nothing as compared to the Coast Range for height."

It was just after this that I abandoned all effort to force a course in architecture, or indeed in any of the arts, upon Peaches. I began dimly to perceive that it was not only useless but that her education was not really impaired by the secession of my efforts along these lines. She possessed a faculty for picking out what she wanted to learn and learning it thoroughly. And after all that is the truest education, as my dear father used to say.

But I digress. Let us take up our sequence where Abby left me on that first afternoon.

Scarcely had she departed, driving off in a smart little red automobile of the type which I had learned to distinguish as a roadster, as I observed from the window, and which gave no clew to the newly disclosed fact of her poverty—scarcely had she departed and I had partially mastered the emotions which her extraordinary visit had engendered in my bosom when Alicia and her father returned.

[Pg 76]

They had been out, as I believe I have mentioned, for the purpose of procuring cards of admission to the public gambling hell. They had also got cards for a place called the casino, one of which was offered to me. I accepted it with gratitude, for at home there was a casino out at Duxbury where we spent our summers; a very charming place it was, too, with a fine view of the ocean from the veranda, and a dance for the young people every Saturday night, and I had greatly enjoyed taking my knitting there. I was at present secretly at work upon a pair of socks for Mr. Pegg, intended as a small appreciation of all he had done for me, and I felt sure that this casino would be an excellent place in which to complete them, particularly when Mr. Pegg and his daughter were away gambling. I had, needless to say, protested against their avowed intentions in this matter, but to no avail.

"Why, Miss Talbot, of course you object!" Mr. Pegg had said, kindly but firmly. "Objecting to this sort of thing is part of your job. If you didn't object you wouldn't be the woman I hired you for. But this is one time you're not wise—you don't get it at all. This gambling joint is strictly high class. The layouts at Dogtown have nothing on it—absolutely! To lose a little something at Monte is like losing a little at monte with a small 'm' over to Dogtown; and allow me to inform you that no California native son's education is completely polished off without that experience. Only over here is where the crowned heads get trimmed—I mean polished. And I propose to have my daughter visit that historic spot so's she can talk intelligently about it at big dinner parties."

[Pg 77]

Well, when Mr. Pegg assumed that tone I knew that further argument was useless. Besides, Peaches herself was very much set on going, and all that was left me was the manifestation of my unalterable disapproval by steadfastly refusing to accompany them or to discuss their experiences in that den of iniquity. Even Richard, the chauffeur, was infected with the dreadful spirit of the place, though I ascertained that the vicious resort which he attended was of a less pretentious order.

There was considerable coolness between us that evening because of my attitude, and when Peaches and her father had departed upon their nefarious errand I read my Bible and went to bed greatly fortified. This coolness lasted into the next day, despite the arrival during breakfast of Abby's invitation to dinner, at which Mr. Pegg and Alicia both evinced great satisfaction. I hoped to divert them into a visit to the churches, but all in vain. Mr. Pegg had lost several hundred dollars, it seemed, and both he and his daughter evinced a strong wish, as they expressed it, "to show these wop gamblers where they got off."

The result was that after luncheon they again left me to my own devices after a second fruitless attempt at persuading me to accompany them, and when they had been gone for half an hour I decided to take my knitting to that casino for which they had given me a card.

The afternoon was exceptionally mild and fine, even for that part of the world, and I anticipated spending it out of doors. I therefore put on a shade hat and a light wrap, packed my fancywork into my knitting bag and making sure that my working specs were in my reticule I set forth into the mildly sunlit avenue.

[Pg 78]

I had no difficulty at all in locating my destination. Indeed the very first native boy of whom I made inquiry directed me volubly. I thanked him and passed on in the direction which he indicated. But when I reached the spot I confess I was astounded and felt obliged to confirm the building's identity by a second inquiry.

It was far, far larger than the casino at Duxbury. Indeed it looked rather more like one or rather several of the houses which the *nouveau riche* have erected at Newport. But this was not altogether surprising when one realized that the number of tourists was undoubtedly far greater than on the Massachusetts coast. And as I approached I noted that a large number of cars were waiting outside. It seemed probable that this indicated a hostess day, or possibly even a private euchre party; so I decided against going in, and entered the gardens instead.

These were amazingly beautiful and extensive, with winding paths and pleasant seats. Here at least I could not complain of any lack of luxuriance in the semi-tropical growth, and selecting a sheltered bench that was shielded from the light breeze by a mass of camellias in full bloom I settled myself for a pleasing period of rest and observation. Very few people were about, and a lovely peace reigned over all.

First I took out the finished sock and regarded it critically in the strong light. It was really well made if I do say so myself, and tasteful, too. The sock itself was black, but round the top the purling was in alternate stripes of black and red; an effort on my part at once to meet Mr. Pegg's taste for the exotic in dress and at the same time offer a conservative surface in that part which would be exposed to the general public. Having then satisfied myself that my work was as my mother would have desired, I counted the setting-up stitches anew to make certain of their number, and began the second sock, my heart content at thought of the pleasant surprise my gift would be. I had completed the top line of red and the first line of black and had just begun on the second line of red when I observed the most dreadful thing.

[Pg 79]

I think I have mentioned that my seat was sheltered by a semicircular bed of evergreen bordered by tall camellias, and was situated in a remote corner of the gardens. The band on the plaza was playing a gay tune and the atmosphere was pleasantly exhilarating. And so I was not paying very

diligent attention to my work. Indeed my eyes were ever prone to rove from my knitting, a fact for which Euphemia has often chided me, though I do quite as well without watching my stitches, the occupation having become second nature with me. Therefore it was by no means unprecedented that I should be contemplating the beautiful shrubs at my right, while nodding my head to the music of the distant band, though my hands were busily engaged.

At first I thought my vision must be at fault, for something stirred just the other side of the bushes, and a hand containing a revolver was slowly lifted, the index finger upon the trigger.

For the first second I felt as if I were stricken by paralysis, and the next I had sprung to my feet and rounded the corner to where the hand was.

"Stop it at once!" I shouted instinctively, though it is a fact that I hardly knew what was to be stopped.

And my command was obeyed. The man who stood there actually did stop, though why in the moment of his surprise that dreadful pistol did not go off I cannot understand. But the hand containing it dropped to his side, and for several seconds we stood staring at each other, he with the pallid daze of one who has been halted on the brink of destruction, and I with the trembling indignation of a respectable female with a most unfeminine situation suddenly thrust upon her.

[Pg 80]

He was a tall thin man, no longer young, and dressed in the extreme of fashion save for a large rabbit's foot that dangled incongruously from his watch chain. His eyes were large and dark and overbrilliant, and his disheveled head was hatless.

"What were you doing?" I asked severely, though I knew perfectly well. "Don't you know that it's a sin?" I went on before he could answer.

"Who are you?" the man asked in English, his voice hoarse and remote. "Go away and allow me to kill myself!"

"Stuff and nonsense!" I replied tartly. "You put that—that weapon into your pocket this minute! Don't you know you are apt to cause us both to be arrested if a police officer should come this way?"

Mechanically he obeyed, slipping the dreadful thing into his coat pocket, and continuing to stare at me in that helpless, dazed fashion.

"Now come and sit down beside me on this bench!" I commanded, gathering my worsteds out of his way. He obeyed like a person in a trance. "There now!" said I. "You poor man, you are all upset! Wait a minute and I'll give you just what you need."

Fortunately it is my habit always to carry a dose of aromatic spirits of ammonia in my reticule in case of emergency, and at length an emergency had arisen. Hastily retrieving the little phial from its hiding place I uncorked it and offered it to my strange companion.

[Pg 81]

"Here—drink this quickly!" I commanded.

He took it and gave a hurried look about to see if anyone observed. There was nobody in sight.

"You are right, it is less noisy!" he whispered. And with a single gulp he drained the phial and returned it to me.

"How long does it take to work?" he whispered feebly, relaxing upon the bench.

"Just a moment," I said soothingly. "There! Don't you feel better already?"

"I do, strangely enough!" he replied, straightening up. "What kind of poison is it?"

"It's aromatic ammonia," I said briskly, "and it won't poison you in the least. Never have I met such a silly person as you are!"

"Baffled again!" he groaned, burying his face in his hands. "Oh, how much better I feel! What a shame! Why could you not let me die?"

"Because it is the business of sensible women to take care of foolish men!" I returned. "Sit up now and tell me all about it. Was it love?"

He obeyed and stared at me in that silly blank way of his.

"Love?" he said. "Worse than that. Money. I have one hundred napoleons left in the world. I decided there were only two courses open to me. Either I must get a sign, an infallible sign how to play, or shoot myself. I decided to wait until two o'clock and if the sign had not manifested itself I would end my life. It was exactly three seconds to two o'clock when you spoke!"

He groaned and dropped his head again.

[Pg 82]

"Well," said I as placidly as I could, "perhaps I am the sign you were looking for. Who knows? See here now, I am going on knitting, and suppose you watch the stitches for a few moments. It's excellent for the nerves. That's it. You'll have yourself well in hand presently."

And indeed even as his eyes fell upon my fancywork he seemed to take a new lease of life. Gradually he became animated. Color returned to his pallid cheeks and a new, though I cannot say a saner light, came into his eyes.

"The sign!" he muttered. "Perhaps it is the sign!" This cryptic remark seemed to be addressed to himself. Then suddenly—he did everything suddenly—he spoke directly to me. "Red and black!" he said, fingering the wool on which I was at work. "Red and black. How many stitches do you take of the red, strange woman?"

"Ten," I said, "and then ten of black and then ten on the red!"

He sprang to his feet with a sudden strange conviction in his manner.

"Twenty on the red! Ten on the black!" said he. "It's a sign. It may be, it must be a sign! I'm off!"

He tossed the sock back to me with a gay gesture and started away. But I was too quick for him. I caught him by the coat tails before he had gone twelve inches.

"Hey, my good man!" said I. "I'll just thank you to hand over that pistol before you go!"

"All right, you can have it!" he exclaimed lightly. "There you are. Don't do anything rash with it. I may need it later!"

He slipped the weapon into my reticule with an amazingly swift gesture, and before I could say "jiffy" he was gone in the direction of the casino. [Pg 83]

Nervous excitement has always exhausted me more than physical exertion, and I have acquired the practice of taking a short nap wherever I may be when the occasion necessitates it. And so when the poor crazy man had gone and seemed little likely to return I settled myself for a cat nap, determined to compose my nerves and not allow my afternoon to be ruined by the disturbing incident. But though I roused myself at intervals and did a few stitches I must have drowsed much longer than I had thought to, for when I awoke thoroughly it was sunset.

I got out dear father's chronometer and was horrified to find the hour past six. Here I had been a public spectacle for goodness knows how long! I at once began to gather my things together, preparatory to leaving for the hotel when I perceived that there was a great to-do at the casino. People began pouring forth and cheering, headed by a wild figure in a black coat.

And then things began to happen fast. Before I could realize that the procession was headed for me it was upon me, lead by my suicidal acquaintance, his pockets bursting with money, his hat, mysteriously retrieved, also brimming with lucre, his vest bulging with it, and his hand full of bank notes. Straight toward me he came, and dropping upon his knees he flung both hands full of money into my lap, the crowd closing in about us despite the police officers, who ran about wildly shouting, "Ladies and gentlemen, order, please!"

"My benefactress! My good angel!" shouted the kneeling man. "My sign from heaven, accept a few miserable hundreds as your inadequate reward!" [Pg 84]

"You have been gambling!" I said severely, while gathering up the money from my lap.

"Yes, I broke the bank on your advice!" he shouted. "Twenty on the red, ten on the black. Take, oh, take your reward, my angel!"

"I will take this shameful money for the foreign missions at home!" I said severely. "It ought to be turned to holy uses, and you will only lose it again! And please get up. You are making us both ridiculous!"

But before he could comply, to my unspeakable horror Alicia and her father pushed their way through the crowd, accompanied by a young man. At sight of me Peaches gave a whoop of joy.

"What price a chaperon!" she yelled. "Free, you little hellion!"

She turned from me to the young man in attendance.

"Good Lord, what'll I have to get her out of next?" she asked him whimsically. And then I recognized him.

It was the Duke di Monteventi!

VI

[Pg 85]

Even amidst the excitement incident to my personal predicament I could not but be surprised at that young man's being there—and with Peaches! He had the most extraordinary way of turning up unexpectedly. And even more remarkable was the way in which he appeared equal to whatever situation he dropped into the midst of, for now it was he who maneuvered my extrication from the embarrassing attentions of the bank-breaking person, and it was on his arm that I departed from that iniquitous spot to which I had so inadvertently wandered. It was not until we returned to the hotel that I learned what had happened, and then dear knows it was nothing to his credit.

It appears that they had met him at the gaming table. But, of course, that could not be counted as wholly against him, inasmuch as Peaches herself had been there, and even I had been near by, though, of course, without intention. Obviously I was not in a position to reprove either of them, though I took the greatest pains to explain in minute detail just how the situation in which they found me had arisen, omitting only the exact nature of the work upon which I had been engaged.

"Never mind, Free!" said Peaches soothingly. "Don't bother to alibi. Both father and I have played hunches ourselves, haven't we, dad? Only it's generally been in person."

This was perfectly unintelligible to me, but the duke apparently understood, for he smiled that wonderful golden smile, which made me feel as if I would do simply anything for him. Then he counted what they persisted in calling my winnings for me. It amounted to nearly two hundred [Pg 86]

francs.

"Are you really going to send it to the missions?" he asked. "You might double it at the tables, you know, Miss Talbot!"

"My dear duke," I informed him promptly, "I wouldn't gamble for the world! I intend turning this money in at once to charitable uses!"

"What a lack of philosophy!" he cried, throwing out his hand in a despairing gesture. "How much is furnished to charity from sources as blind, isn't it? But for that poor gambler where would your donation be? Don't you believe the end often justifies the means?"

Peaches took this up.

"You mean a person has to fight the world with its own weapons lots of times," she said quickly.

"I do," he said.

"Well, my dear father always held that fair means made clean profits," I said, rising. "And I believe that no matter what the end, the process to it should be honest."

And then I left them to make out a money order to Doctor Andrews, as I did not like having all that cash upon my person; and anyway the receptacle in which I carried such things would not contain so much.

In the corridor I ran into Mr. Pegg. I would have passed on my way, but he detained me.

"I wanted to ask you, Miss Talbot," he began, "what was the dope you gave that feller that he won on?" His voice was low and eager.

"I didn't tell him a thing!" I responded indignantly. "I know nothing whatever of gambling, Mr. Pegg, as you are perfectly well aware!" [Pg 87]

"I'm not so dead sure about what you know and what you don't," said Mr. Pegg slowly. "But I am disappointed you won't tell me what you told that feller to do."

"I assure you I imparted to him no information of any sort whatsoever!" I repeated with dignity. "I am beginning to think every one has gone a little mad in this climate!"

"Well, of course the climate ain't like California," murmured my employer automatically. "But I'd like to know what you told him."

Well, I wasn't going to discuss that crazy man or my conversation regarding the socks I was making, and so I fled to the seclusion of my chamber and the completion of my errand.

But when I had written my letter and addressed my envelope I fell into a reverie in which my thoughts were occupied by the Duke di Monteventi. It was perfectly apparent that he was going to see something of Peaches—in all likelihood as much as she would permit—and unless my premonition and intuition were wholly at fault that would mean a good deal.

And why not? That was the question. Was there any reason why not? Of course Alicia had her parent, who was naturally the prime factor in any restraint that might be put upon her. But then, Mr. Pegg did not know of the incident of the motion-picture house. Not that there was anything in it to the young man's discredit. But suitable bachelors did not generally have a mystery attached to them anywhere. Of course we did not as yet even know that he was a bachelor, though from the way he looked at Peaches I earnestly hoped he was. [Pg 88]

Should I inform Mr. Pegg of what I knew? But what, after all, did I know? Nothing except that two quite unattractive foreigners seemed to have designs upon him. And those friends of his, Lord and Lady Gordon, were presumably highly desirable. Well, Abby might know something about him. I felt my responsibility toward Peaches heavily. And yet I longed for a romance. Or at any rate, at least for the spectacle of one. Such a time and such a place demanded it. Through the window of my unhomelike hotel bedroom crept the scent of exotic blossoms on the wings of a gentle breeze which stirred my letter to the minister to a faint fluttering. I looked at it hard for a long moment, a trifle saddened that so much sweetness should be wasted on anything less than a love epistle. Then I collected my emotions, put them, metaphorically speaking, away in dried lavender, where they belonged, sealed my letter and made myself ready for dinner.

When I rejoined my little family the duke had gone, but Peaches could talk of nothing else.

"Isn't he a regular guy?" she challenged the world from her seat upon the end of a high table. "He's two inches taller than I am! We measured. And he's the goods—absolutely! Got an old ranch that was staked out during the pioneer Christian days, back in the mountains. But it's been let run down."

"Orchards?" inquired her father, his interest quickening.

"Some," said his daughter. "But mostly human livestock, I guess. A tenantry, they call it."

"Italian for rent hog," commented her father.

And we went down to dinner. [Pg 89]

One of our more popular, less erudite poets, has remarked that "There's nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream." Or perhaps it was a classic poet. I am not certain which, and must for once confess to ignorance as to the origin of a quotation. But it is one—the sentence, I mean—for which I have long cherished a liking. It is ill-expressed perhaps, but profoundly true. Love's dream is always young: that is one of the finest things about it. The tenderer emotions have a curious faculty of restoring youth, or at least temporarily renewing it. Even love at secondhand,

by observation or by inference as it were, is capable of producing a reformation of the spirit which in its new-found vitality at once questions the body as to its actual age and state of decrepitude. Is one ever really old? Does one pass the period when romantic love can obsess one without one's justifying ridicule? Is there, indeed, any such period? Does not true love always dignify its victim? These are the questions which such a contact must invariably engender. And I confess to being no exception to the rule as I watched Alicia and the duke.

What a romance! How pleasing in every way! Two such handsome young people might have been, as it were, taken bodily from the drawings in Godey's Ladies' Book, so incredibly beautiful were they; or from the decorative cover of a more modern magazine, so athletic was their appearance.

One of the very first items to catch and hold my admiring attention in the progress of their affair was the bouquet which he sent her the morning after his arrival. Here in a land where flowers were cheap and plentiful, instead of sending a bushel of blossoms, as the average admirer would have done, a small box appeared containing an exquisite corsage bouquet. She was almost bound to wear it. And she did. So far so good, but what was in even better taste and a further sign of breeding, there was a handful of roses for me!

[Pg 90]

"My dear," said I as Peaches gave them to me, "that young man is a thoroughbred, take my word for it, even if he is a foreigner!"

"Well, he's only half Italian, you see!" replied my lovely giantess in cheerful explanation. "His mother was a Miss Winton, from Cambridge, the daughter of the American consul at Nice. She married a title, that's all."

"A Winton of Cambridge!" I exclaimed, a great light dawning upon me. "That explains it, of course. The Wintons were very decent people, my dear; very decent, though not very old. I am sure I remember that correctly. I will write and ask some one at home for further particulars. Meanwhile I know no reason why you should not see something of him if you wish."

"Thanks!" said Peaches. "I believe I might. In fact we had thought of taking a ride this afternoon. He's got a friend here in the Besseleri and can borrow two horses. Would that be quite all right, as the English say?"

"Certainly, if you take a groom along," said I, recalling what little I knew on this particular point of etiquette.

I had never indulged in equestrian sports in my own youth, nor had Euphemia, and so my authoritative tone was derived from surmises I had made from pictures I had seen on the subject—pictures, it must be confessed, in an English magazine, where a groom in pen and ink always figured in the sketches of Rotten Row.

[Pg 91]

Yet when Peaches had departed sniffing at her bouquet, to write him a note, because, as she averred, the telephone service was so bad—much worse than the Los Angeles system—I wondered vaguely if she had not been making game of me in asking my permission and advice. Ordinarily I should have been certain that she was, but this time there was a genuine anxiety on her part to do the correct thing—a faint doubting of her own omnipotence which was new and wholly delightful.

I yearned over her with an unuttered blessing, and returned to work upon my, or that is to say, Mr. Pegg's sock. How delightful the world seemed! And, of course, his being a Winton made such a difference!

Of Peaches on horseback I have little to say besides the fact that she and the duke required the two tallest horses in the regiment. Words fail me when I attempt to describe how she looked, for there she was in her element. By some mysterious process she had acquired a hat belonging to one of the officers—a strange hat indeed for a man to have worn at any time, for it was covered with cock's plumes. And Peaches wore it with an air of nonchalance difficult to describe. But it certainly did look very like the pictures to which I have referred as my authority on the subject of horseback riding. There was no groom with them, but Mr. Pegg had decided to go along, so that was all right. I saw them start and then decided to have the yellow brocade which I had purchased in Paris made up for the wedding.

As things were, I was not altogether surprised to find the Duke di Monteventi at Abby's house on the first occasion of our going there for dinner. I was glad it was so magnificent an entertainment with music, because when those two young people met in the beautiful hallway there should have been music and flowers, and there were! I have positively never seen anything so handsome as the duke in evening dress, except Peaches in that simple Nile-green satin gown! They came together like—like two branches of a stream—at once playfully antagonistic and blending! Yet their language was curiously unromantic.

[Pg 92]

"Cheero!" said the duke. "You look ripping!"

"You're not so dusty yourself," rejoined Peaches.

And then Abby bore down upon us; Abby in a perfectly outrageous black evening gown with diamonds as big as pigeons' eggs in her ears, and very little else. She sailed up like a small sloop, all trig and confident, and after pecking me on the cheek extended a flower-like hand to Mr. Pegg.

"It's awfully good of you to come!" she said. "Dear Freedom has talked of you so often!"

"Charmed!" murmured Mr. Pegg, his eyes riveted upon her smooth head. "Delighted!"

It was quite perfect, and I experienced a tremendous sense of relief. One would never have suspected that he was paying for this gorgeous entertainment. But I did not like the look he gave her, nor the way his eyes followed her all evening. Somehow it made me unpleasantly conscious of my own hair, in which I had always heretofore maintained a good deal of pride. And somehow my gray corded silk with the collar of real lace and mamma's cameo pin did not seem quite so lovely as I had always thought them, either; though they were undoubtedly more modest and more suitable to our age than Abby's costume was. Fortunately my walkrite shoes did not show under my gown, and I managed to keep them pretty well concealed through the evening. But I digress.

[Pg 93]

Abby's villa was a delightful one, situated, as she had said, at the back of the pleasantly cosmopolitan little town of San Remo, and nestling high on the sheltering hills, the miniature garden being built on terraces and inclosed by a whitewashed wall against which the evergreens of the mountain crowded sharply, and over which the roses and geraniums and clematis flung abandoned sprays of sweetness, as if the little inclosure were an overflowing bowl of goodies. There were minute statuettes in the garden, veiled and softened by moss and the winter damps of a century, and a little fountain half choked with water flowers, but tinkling endlessly from a broken conch shell. There were hidden benches, too, set as though for lovers; and, incongruously, a smooth bit of turf near the veranda where Abby practiced putting, which is, I am informed, a section of the game of golf.

But though the garden was old and steeped in romance the interior of the villa was modernized and gay. And on the night of this, our first entertainment there, a sense of festivity was diffused by a clever profusion of half-hidden lights, quantities of flowers, sporting prints, magazines galore, for Abby read nothing else, and a general crowding together of old and new furnishings, even to pictures and hangings, until the little house seemed incapable of holding another thing. But it was brave and gay and being made the best of—very like Abby herself.

Of the guests besides ourselves there was not much to be said in the way of charm, but a great deal in the way of distinction and quality. For there was Sir Anthony and Lady Spier, who did nothing in the world except live in San Remo each winter and compare it unfavorably with Sussex, to which, however, they seldom returned. They looked a good deal alike and ate heartily. Sir Anthony had set views on California, where he had never been, and he positively refused to accept Mr. Pegg's statements about it, which circumstance gave rise to quite a lively discussion.

[Pg 94]

There were also present a Mr. and Mrs. H. De Vere-Poole, of New York; expensive-looking people who Abby afterward assured me were very fashionable. And no doubt they were—in New York. But in Boston I had never heard of them, though of course Mrs. Poole was familiar with my family and asked a few vague questions about some Boston people named Cabot, after which she lapsed into the cigarette-infested silence which appeared habitual with her.

Then there was a voluble captain of the Queen's Bodyguard, in uniform, an acquaintance of the duke's, and of a distinguished but broken family, I believe. However that may have been, I do not know. But I can vouch for the condition of his English, which was worse than broken; it was shattered. And that was the company.

As for the food—I never saw so much food so thoroughly disguised in my life. It resembled an edible patchwork quilt made out of whole cloth. But it was delicious. All in all the venture was a huge success and my protégés behaved splendidly.

It was only after dinner, under the influence of a cigar—Abby permitted smoking in any part of the house, it seemed—that Mr. Pegg relaxed into his natural manner, and I began to fear disaster. Peaches was smoking—every one was smoking, in fact, except myself. And Mr. Pegg, sticking his thumbs into the armholes of his black and white striped silk vest, refused to be seated, but strode about the crowded drawing-rooms, asking questions about all that they contained. I am mortified to confess that he appeared chiefly interested in the intrinsic value of the objects which attracted his attention, and showed no hesitancy about asking their price.

[Pg 95]

"Since I come over here abroad, countess," he remarked to Abby, who followed languidly in his trail, a cigarette in an immensely long holder between her artificially reddened lips—"since I come over I sure have had an eye opener about secondhand pictures and furniture and such stuff! That's why I'm interested in your things. I thought I knew something about commercial values, but I see I can learn."

"Why, I thought Sebastian Markheim was a great friend of yours!" commented Abby. "And he's a famous collector."

"He's a famous collector of culls and worn-out stock," chuckled the Citrus King. "Bought a ranch near one of mine, and the hoppers ate what trees he had, the first year. Then I got him a flock of turkeys to keep 'em down and he done better next year. But all the secondhand antiques he had over to his ranch house come from a fire sale in Oroville, and consisted principally of a slightly scorched set of real genuine varnished oak dating way back to 1910."

"Who is this that possessed such a treasure?" asked the duke, strolling up and joining our little tour of inspection—for I was with them, being anxious to hear what Mr. Pegg and Abby were talking about.

"Sebastian Markheim!" replied Abby quickly. "He is a friend of dear Mr. Pegg's."

[Pg 96]

Dear Mr. Pegg indeed! And she had never met him before that evening! I determined to do something about this at once; though just what, and about what, I did not quite know at the moment, but you will understand me. Mr. Pegg, however, beamed at Abby, and then turned to

the duke.

"Neighbor of mine on the coast," he explained. "Nice feller, but knows nothing at all about citrus fruit."

"But he does know about antiques," laughed the duke. "His collection is world-famous. Are you interested along those lines?"

"More curious than anything," Mr. Pegg admitted. "You see, I don't intend to let any branch of knowledge go untouched if I can help it. That's one of the traits that makes us Americans so remarkable."

"I see," replied Monteventi. "Have you shown him the Mantegna?" he went on, turning to Abby.

"Mantegna!" I exclaimed; "A genuine Mantegna! How wonderful!"

"Let's have a look!" said my employer.

"It's in here!" assented our hostess, and led the way into a little alcove room, where upon the bare plaster wall the masterpiece hung—a strange, melancholy primitive of the ascension, the agony of the dark ages in its solemn coloring, and struggling for technic. I stood in silent awe,—it was such a precious thing to be in private ownership, and of all persons, in Abby's! I sighed and turned, to see a curious look upon the face of the young duke, who towered beside me. Never had I seen anything so amazing as the transformation which had taken place in him. There came into it a look of reverence mixed with a passionate fire which seemed almost for the moment to consume him. His face was that of a saint, a religious fanatic, a young crusader. His eyes burned and the color had receded from his cheeks. To say that I was shocked and fascinated at this transformation is to put it mildly. Then he caught my eyes and his color came back.

[Pg 97]

"You understand pictures, Miss Talbot," he said quietly. "I remember."

"Pretty homely, I call it," said Mr. Pegg's voice behind us. "But I suppose that makes it all the more valuable. How much do you calculate it is worth?"

In an instant the duke had turned to him, his expression normal once more.

"An Italian work of art of such a character as this is beyond price," he declared, a deep note in his voice; "though that little painting would easily fetch a hundred thousand dollars in the market—which it will never reach, thank God!"

"You seem to think a lot of it," replied Mr. Pegg. "I wouldn't give five dollars for it, but I suppose some people would."

"Markheim, for instance!" remarked the duke. "But he couldn't get it. One of our charming hostess' chief claims to distinction is that though an American by birth she has the Italian loyalty about such matters."

He bowed charmingly.

"Sandro means that no matter how hard up I was I wouldn't break the law by selling an Italian work of art for export," she explained lightly. "And this one, least of all. It came from my late husband's home," she went on, "and is one of the few things I managed to save."

"Is there a law about taking such things out of Italy?" asked Mr. Pegg.

[Pg 98]

"I should say there was!" exclaimed the duke. "The country was being stripped by moneyed foreigners until it was enforced. We natives feel strongly on the subject, Mr. Pegg. But it is a dangerous thing to smuggle a masterpiece out of Italy now, I am happy to say."

"Then how do you suppose Mr. Markheim succeeded in getting the Madonna of the Lamp," I put in, "which he bought last month?"

"Markheim has Raphael's masterpiece!" he cried sharply. "Since when?"

"Well, young man, you needn't look at me like that," I said. "I didn't smuggle it for him, I'm sure! He bought it in New York; why, on the very day that you discovered that robbery at the Gordons'!"

"Curious that I didn't see the notice," he murmured, still staring at me. "I beg pardon, Miss Talbot. I didn't mean to be rude, I'm sure. But this was the first I had heard of it, and such things interest me greatly."

"They would interest any Italian," declared Abby. "You see, things are occasionally smuggled out in spite of an eternal vigilance on the part of the secret service. Though as I remember, it's a good long while since the Madonna of the Lamp disappeared. It was reported to be in Berlin years ago, but this is the first time it has actually come to light. Very interesting, I'm sure. And if we really should go to war with Austria I expect we would have the opportunity of bringing back a great many things across the mountains yonder. Let's go out, by the way, and have a look at them in the moonlight."

She tucked her arm into that of Mr. Pegg in the most exasperatingly familiar way, which he did not seem to resent in the least, and together they went out through the window into the moon-filled garden. And even as they went Peaches appeared in the doorway, her hair wind-blown and her magnificent dress a trifle disordered, but if possible even more lovely than ever.

[Pg 99]

"Oh, there you are, Sandro!" she said, catching sight of the duke. "Come outside, quick! There's an aeroplane flying right into the moon. They say it's Caproni himself!"

And forthwith they vanished, leaving me to absorb a detailed description of Sir Anthony's

indigestion, delivered by himself, which description lasted for the remainder of the evening. But my thoughts were on other things, though I said "Yes?" and "Indeed!" automatically whenever Sir Anthony came to a full stop.

So it was "Sandro" already, was it? And that same Sandro, who loved famous paintings so, and knew such a lot about them, had been somewhere that newspapers did not reach from the time the panels were stolen from the château in which he was visiting, until he reappeared at Monte Carlo. But where had he been during that period, and what doing? I puzzled the matter over all the while as we said good night and climbed into our high-powered motor, at the wheel of which Richard, the chauffeur, sat like a sullen schoolboy, while Peaches, abandoning her usual place beside him, climbed into the back with the duke, whom we were dropping at his hotel.

And the puzzle stayed in my mind after Peaches was asleep that night, she having first talked herself tired about her Sandro, she describing him in turn as a king, a sport, a Greek statue and a bearcat. And I was still puzzling over him for an hour after Morpheus had claimed her, which hour I occupied in trying on various pairs of her high-heeled French shoes, and finding them less uncomfortable than I had anticipated and certainly more becoming to the foot than my hygiene walkrite footwear. Of course Peaches' shoes were too big for me, as my foot was smaller than Abby's, considerably smaller, in fact; whereas Peaches' footgear was—well, Californian. But it did well enough to practice in, and I took advantage of this solitary hour to do so.

[Pg 100]

But all the while that I walked up and down my chamber, the heels occasionally almost betraying me, my mind was on the duke. I determined to ask Abby all about him, for I deemed it my duty. And besides that, I wanted to see Abby soon again; I wanted to find out where she got her corsets.

VII

[Pg 101]

At this point in my narrative I call to mind the fact that my dear father ever laid the greatest stress upon the importance of the effect which the pursuit of reading has upon the human mind and upon the minds of juveniles in particular. He was convinced that if Euclid were read to a point of thorough familiarity at the age of twelve years by every male American the result would be a marked effect upon the political life of the nation, I remember; and he recommended that girls from the age of nine to nineteen be made thoroughly conversant with Saint Paul. In his famous treatise on the subject, entitled *The Education of Freedom Talbot*, he dwells at length upon the supreme importance of young people having access to books of the best quality without "let or hindrance," and devotes three chapters to the influence upon the later life of the individual of those books which are perused during the preadolescent and adolescent periods.

And unquestionably his deductions in this matter, as in all others, were sound. For in looking back upon my conduct from the time of my leaving Euphemia, my home, and the carefully regulated routine of my existence in Boston I perceive that my course was unquestionably influenced by a volume of which I obtained possession at the age of eleven, though I have greatly feared since—indeed I was, in point of fact, greatly in fear at the time when I perused its fascinating intricacies—that it was not a book which my paternal parent would have selected as suitable for the sprouting of the young idea—especially for a sprout of the feminine gender. The title of this dubious but well-remembered literary production was *Daisy Dashforth, the Girl Detective*, and was the fruit of the pen of some lesser literary light whom Fame has allowed to sink into oblivion.

[Pg 102]

But there was in it some quality of keenness, of wit, of relish for adventure, of sharpness of observation, which remained with me, and which I refuse to dismiss as of no importance. Indeed it is quite possible that without the subconscious influence upon my mind of this book, which had remained in abeyance through the years until occasion called it forth—it is quite possible, I say, that without it I should never have had courage to take the initial step which pried me loose from the home of my ancestors and set me forth upon a career at a time of life when most females are drawing such careers as God has appointed for them to a close. Of course I had the incentive of keeping the ancestral roof over Euphemia's head to drive me forth from under it; but that was no doubt reënforced by the memory of Daisy. Moreover, the book had sharpened my taste for mystery and my instinct for seeing beneath the surface of things, which faculty, in more commonplace surroundings, would in all probability have been turned to the viler uses of village gossip.

So it was from a combined motive of scientific research into a situation which to me at least had begun to savor of mystery and a sense of duty to my employer that I went to visit with Abby. Nobody could suspect me of the desire for gossip. It was simply my plain duty to discover what I could about this handsome young duke before my charge became hopelessly involved in his toils—in other words to find out if they were really toils, or merely addresses. And incidentally I wished to confirm my impression of how Abby dressed her hair, achieving that youthful effect with such success.

[Pg 103]

So packing up my knitting I put on a pair of Alicia's high-heeled shoes for practice, strapping them on with elastic bands; without, however, mentioning the circumstance to her for fear that she would ridicule my enterprise; and requesting of Richard, the chauffeur, that he convey me to San Remo, we set forth in company. Alicia was nowhere about when I left, but there was no doubt in my mind as to who was with her, wherever she was. Apparently there existed no doubt

in the mind of Talbot, either. I was seated beside him so as to be nearer help in case of an accident, and as we bowled along over the perfect road with its enchanting vistas of sea and fascinating walled gardens I could not fail to note the grave look upon his clean, if somewhat rough profile. His long nose was particularly expressive. I was not surprised when he broke the silence with his customary freedom but without his habitual gay carelessness.

"Say, Cousin Mary," he began, using the absurd form of address of which I had been quite unable to break him—"say, Cousin Mary, lookit here. What do you think of this he-duke of Peaches'? Do you think she likes him pretty well?"

"It is a trifle dangerous to surmise what a young woman may think about a young man until a definite announcement is made," I replied.

We rode a little farther in silence and then he broke out again.

"He's a foreigner!" he said with all the distrust that a good American is capable of imparting to the term. "A foreigner! I can't see how he came to be such a bucko! But he is, all right, all right, and she's crazy over him! Damn it, I might have known I couldn't hold her!"

[Pg 104]

"Talbot!" I exclaimed. "Don't swear! And you must remember that democracy is for the poor. Upon becoming so rich it was but—but American for Peaches to acquire a proper sense of her social superiority and to confirm it by marrying a title. Though in her case I believe we can feel sure that her affections would come first. If she marries this young man it will be simply and solely because she loves him. We can depend on that."

Then I caught sight of his face and wished I had not spoken.

"I guess he's a fine chap," he said slowly. "And he can give her a fancy handle to her name. Judas Priest! What can I give her? I'm—I'm a servant, I am. I've learned a lot since I came over here. Let's go back to California!"

"I know, Richard," I replied soothingly. "California, where there are no servants! I'm really sorry, dear boy, but remember we don't know anything definite yet. And we don't know anything against the duke, either."

"Do you know about his older brother?" asked Richard, the chauffeur, abruptly.

"No! What about him?" I answered quickly.

"He disappeared very mysteriously about ten years ago," said Richard. "Two guys that was on the boat coming over from England was talking to me about it. They are here now. I met them in a saloon and they told me a little something."

[Pg 105]

"Repeat it all, Richard!" I commanded. "What did they say?"

"Well, it seems this brother was the duke," elucidated my informant. "He was last seen in Africa on a hunting expedition with our duke. And then the both of them disappeared for a while. When the duke come back he had the title. There seems to be some doubt about his having a honest claim to it."

"What nonsense!" I said. "Talbot, you no sooner convince me that you are not a servant than you begin to talk like one. My Cousin Abby receives him, and that is enough! You should not listen to such wild stories!"

By this time we had reached the Villa Bordeaux, and taking my workbag I descended. Richard, the chauffeur, parked the car and settled back in it, presumably to dwell upon the unhappy course of his love while he waited for me; and I entered the villa, much disturbed by what he had just told me, and determined to find out the whole truth at once.

I found Cousin Abby immersed in newspapers, cigarette smoke and a most attractive negligee; and though I could never endure to see a woman lounging round the house in a wrapper I confess she looked charming. At my entrance she glanced up without rising.

"Hello, Free!" she greeted me over the dangling filthy weed that clung to her lip like—like Richard's! "Hello, old thing! Sit down. Smoke? Oh, of course not! I've been reading about this beastly war we are going to have. Won't it be a bore?"

"Do you really think England and Germany will break?" I said. It was what every one said in those days, a sort of formula of greeting like "Good morning" or "How do you do" without meaning it too seriously, don't you know? And then more vital matters would be taken up.

[Pg 106]

"Oh, I don't really suppose so!" she said. "I'm glad to see you, my dear. Did that charming Mr. Pegg enjoy my little party?"

"I am sure he did!" I replied, stiffening a little. Her tone was altogether too intimate. "So did I, and so did Alicia. It is about her that I have come principally, Abby."

"You mean about the duke?" inquired Abby, with surprising astuteness. "I noticed they were pretty thick."

"I assume you would not have invited the young man unless you knew him to be desirable?" I said earnestly.

"I didn't invite him!" said my sprightly relative. "He called me up in the afternoon and insisted upon coming! I would never have dared to take the responsibility of inviting Sandro to meet any woman—but he simply said that he knew them and knew they were coming, and so was he."

"But my dear!" I exclaimed. "He is simply a chance—a very chance acquaintance with us. You

must know him well to call him by his first name. Tell me all about him!"

"I do know him well!" she admitted, lighting a new cigarette as I started a new row on my sock. "Everybody who is anybody knows Sandro. He plays about with the very best people. I've known him for ten years. But I know absolutely nothing about him. He has a good figure and a charming smile and never borrows money, though he gambles heavily at periods. And that's all I can say." [Pg 107]

"But my dear!" I protested. "Who are his family? Surely you know that?"

"That's simple enough!" said Abby. "His mother was a Miss Winton, as you know—the daughter of the American consul here at San Remo. His father was the holder of one of our very oldest titles. There was a brother who was killed in Africa in a game accident—an older twin, I believe. Really, my dear, I don't think there is the faintest mystery about Sandy, as we call him. No money—land-poor with an old rat's nest of a castle back in the hills, and not fit, they say, for human habitation; a Harvard education, expensive tastes and an aptitude for recouping at the tables here—a clever amateur of the arts and a dear fellow. And that's all. Why, what more is there to know about any unattached young male?"

"Poverty would be no crime in this case," I observed. "Though I think that if he is so hard up he ought to go to work."

"He's not hard up, except for a duke!" laughed Abby. "At least he always seems to have enough to get by with. There's no talk of debts, he doesn't keep a car, and lives extremely modestly."

"And you have never heard anything peculiar about him?" I persisted.

"Well, I wouldn't go quite as far as to say that!" said Abby, "for it was very vague. About a year ago I heard that the secret service was supposed to be shadowing him. We were staying at the same country house, the Welch-Finleys, and he left utterly without warning, and it gave rise to some talk. People remembered about his brother, and, of course, no one has ever understood quite how he died. They were devoted, however—mad about each other; I know it for a fact. And Sandy often speaks of him most affectionately." [Pg 108]

"Still it isn't usual for the secret service to shadow people—the best people, is it?" I protested.

"Oh, quite!" said Abby. "At least in Europe it is. Nowadays everybody is suspected of being a Prussian or an Englishman or a Frenchman or an Italian, according as they proclaim themselves to be the other. You see, everybody is in the secret service of at least one nation, or say they are, and to be overlooked by the police would be rather a slight. So don't worry about the smiling duke, because he is quite all right as far as we know, and that is a long way in this wicked, sophisticated old world. And now do tell me more about dear Mr. Pegg! He has promised to drive me out to Sorrento to-morrow. And tell me all about lemons!"

"I'd rather you'd tell me who makes your stays, my dear!" I replied. "They are so youthful!"

Well, that was all I could learn from Abby—I mean about the duke. Upon the secondary subject she was most generously full of information. And I came away reassured to a certain extent.

On the other hand I did not like Abby's calling Mr. Pegg by his intimate name of Pinto, which she did once or twice during the remainder of our talk. Because I could not bring myself to the belief that Abby would be the proper stepmother for Peaches. Their tastes were too much alike. And though I had very little against Abby except her clothes, I was as yet unconvinced that clothes would make a man happy. And while I worked on the socks I was making for Mr. Pegg as I sat up late that night waiting for Peaches to return from a moonlit walk with the duke, I wondered again and again how a woman of Abby's age could think so much of such things. [Pg 109]

When Peaches came in at last and I had helped her out of the dress of light gray satin which she had worn, I could not but think that the girl was daily giving greater justification to her pet name. Her skin was as smooth and soft as the satin from which it emerged, and as gleaming. The garment itself was like a piece of the silver night outside, and her eyes were deep soft pools, her head like a golden star. It hardly seemed right that any woman should be so beautiful. She had taken some softening quality from the Italian skies as if this corner of the globe which was so like and yet so unlike her native heath had rubbed off the crudities left by the sharper climate, and done so the more readily because the country was all so familiar to her—far more so than to Boston-bred me—and she was ripe for impressions, whereas I was merely ready for comparisons. She was unusually silent, though her glowing face was as easily read as a printed page. I helped her into a soft white negligee.

"Sandy!" she said, going to the window and looking down at the dimly twinkling town and the black, moon-cut shape of the sweeping coast line. "I am going to call him Sandy! I can put my head on his shoulder without leaning down, Free!"

"Eh?" I said sharply.

But the wretched child wouldn't tell me another thing. Not that it needed much telling. When they were together, which was practically all the time, one could have cut the atmosphere with a piece of wedding silver it was so thick and soft. When their eyes met suddenly it made my heart jump and I wanted to cry. It was lovely, lovely! And she said so little about it that I knew it must be serious. [Pg 110]

One day in the garden at San Remo, where we now spent much of our time, she asked him to pick her a rose which was growing just out of her reach, but not out of his. It delighted her to confirm his superior height, and she did it at every conceivable opportunity. He reached the rose easily and she gave him her little gold penknife, which she had been using to gather a bouquet, to cut

the stem with. It was a beautiful knife, with her name on it in diamonds, a most characteristic gift from her father.

"By jove, what a jolly one!" said the duke.

"Keep it, Sandy," said Peaches.

And while he smiled his protest she fastened it to his watch chain by the little ring through the end.

"Oh, don't do that!" I cried, getting to my feet. "Don't give a knife! I am not in the least addicted to superstitions, but really you must not give him a knife!"

"I'll give her a penny for it, Miss Talbot," said he. "That makes it quite all right, you know."

And laughingly she took the coin and slipped it inside her girdle. I found it there that night, and it had made an ugly red mark which must have been painful. But girls are such absurdly sentimental things that it is quite—quite, well, charming. And as for the little gold knife, we had later good cause to remember that it was in his possession.

What a gay month it was! Such *festas*, such expeditions into the country, such evenings of excitement, with the beautiful romance between Alicia and the duke weaving in and out through all our adventures like a golden thread in a bright embroidery! The duke was as care free and gorgeous a lover as any princess could have desired.

[Pg 111]

Only two things marred what would otherwise have been a perfect period, and one was the absurd way in which Abby set her cap for Mr. Pegg. The other was my personal discomfort in becoming accustomed to the strait-jacket furnished by the corsetiere to whom Abby sent me. But the effect unquestionably justified the means, and they did make me look younger. Not that Mr. Pegg seemed to observe the circumstances. He was monopolized in the most outrageous way by that unscrupulous cousin of mine. Not that I cared in the least, but the way men can be taken in by a lot of falderals and clothes and artificial aids to beauty is certainly astonishing; and Abby made no scruple of using them all. Indeed, she was a most worldly woman and was infecting us all with her worldliness. Perhaps the culmination of this tendency occurred at a garden party which she gave, and at which a great many things happened that had far-reaching consequences.

I may say at once that wine was one of the primary causes for the phenomenon which developed during the course of the evening. I recall that my dear father had a very concise philosophy concerning wine and its effect upon the human system, though, of course, the feminine portion of his household never partook of it with the possible exception of a glass of port at Christmas; or a portion of gin upon the occasion of a fainting spell, when it was considered most beneficial in its medicinal effect. But outside of its uses as a restorative for the vapors, we never used it, and I may state in the interests of accuracy that though my father referred to the substance which he imbibed in the masculine seclusion of the dining room after the departure of the ladies as "wine," it was in truth rum, imported direct from Jamaica, in which he indulged, if indeed so lax a term may be properly employed in connection with him. Nevertheless, "wine" was a sort of generic term with him for all alcoholic stimulants, and he believed in its judicious usage and even quoted from the Old Testament in its behalf, referring in particular and most frequently to the incident of Noah's having planted a vineyard immediately upon the opportunity for so doing having arisen.

[Pg 112]

"Wine," my dear father would often remark, especially when in argument with our worthy pastor—the subject was often debated between them—"wine is the immemorial link which man has made with which to hitch himself to the gods; it is the weak man's courage, the poor man's wealth, the coward's glory and the failure's apology. Through wine man becomes the things he dreams of being—great, strong, powerful. The grape absorbs the sun, and the wine puts sunshine into men's hearts; without it the world would begin to look for vices to take the place of conviviality."

It will thus be seen that we were reared in a proper attitude toward Bacchus—indulging mildly ourselves, but properly condemning any misuse on the part of our neighbors. Of course we knew how to use it, but so, too, did we know how to act toward those weaker ones who could not discriminate between discretion and Saturday night.

This is not a digression. It is rather an explanation of how and why I came to be a participant in the festival which Abby gave in the gardens of her villa at San Remo.

[Pg 113]

Up to the date of her entertainment I had never touched a drop of any alcoholic stimulant except in poundcake or ignited upon plum pudding, partially because I had not felt that my dear father's dissertations applied to the gentler sex but were intended principally for what Peaches was wont to term an "alibi" for his own.

But in Europe things were so different. Women smoked without loss of reputation, and even mere babes were given claret in their drinking water in the superstition that it prevented fever or bowlegs, I forget which. At any rate the taboo was lifted—I mean the lid, again to quote my charge—and being so near Rome I thought it no harm to do as the, as it were, Romans did.

And hard indeed must the heart have been to refuse any part of the conviviality upon such a night as this was. The moon was marvelous beyond words. All the flowers in the world seemed to have gathered together in that little pleasance between the gleaming whitewashed, vine-burdened walls. Lanterns hung like strings of dull golden moons from tree to tree. Dear Mr. Pegg walking with me beneath them compared them most poetically to oranges.

"Almost as big as Golden Americans!" he exclaimed jokingly.

Below us, down the moon-swept hillside, lay the Mediterranean, reflecting the mystery and romance of Italy almost, as it were, audibly. And audible also, but not too violently so, was the gayly costumed orchestra which sang as it played, and swayed with the rhythm of its own music. There were uniforms and beautiful dresses everywhere, picked out and accentuated by the sombre formal clothes of the civilians. Indoors there was laughter and dancing. The ballroom was a pool of yellow light in which the dancers seemed to swim in a melted sweetness of sound. Every one was gay. I was gay because of that lovely romantic reference of Mr. Pegg's to the lanterns. And then a series of events rose out of which my gayety seemed curiously to increase.

[Pg 114]

I was sitting outside alone, my escort, Sir Anthony, having gone off to speak to some one, when I saw Peaches and the duke emerge laughingly from the ballroom. I have often seen her beautiful, but never so beautiful as on this occasion. She was clad in an amber satin gown of the exact hue of her marvelous hair, and her only ornament was a huge string of amber beads. She looked like the incarnation of all the gold and sunshine of her native State, and the duke was gazing upon her in a way that sent shivers up and down my back. They came along the path slowly, utterly absorbed in each other. The dance music inside had ceased and the orchestra was singing again—a sweet agony of sound with the ancient words: *O dolce Napoli!*

The lovers passed into the darkness just beyond me—the darkness pulsating with that utterly unrepressed foreign music. And then somebody opened an upper window, from which came a ray of light. It lifted the heads of the two out of their seclusion as though with a knife. But they were oblivious of it. Never have I hoped—I mean, expected—to witness anything like those two blind faces pressed together. They were mouth to mouth, immovable, like Rodin's statue. There is something very terrible in seeing a thing like that—in seeing something which even the participants close their eyes upon. I staggered to my feet and made a run for the house—as efficient a run as my new high-heeled slippers would permit, and there encountered Sir Anthony on the terrace.

[Pg 115]

"Miss Talbot!" he exclaimed. "You look quite upset! Allow me to get you a glass of wine!"

"I am upset—but oh, so happy!" I exclaimed.

But I accepted the wine. It was a very mild yellow fluid which tickled the throat pleasingly and, far from administering any shock to the system such as I had anticipated, it seemed to have no effect whatsoever beyond creating a feeling of thirst. I took a second glass, which only increased my need, and as it was so light and harmless I partook of a third.

I then began to realize more fully what a truly delightful evening we were having, and even whispered to my escort that I had good reason for believing that Peaches and her Sandy were engaged. I even called him Sandy, I recall. Sir Anthony at once proposed that we drink their health—quite between ourselves, of course. Which we proceeded to do, and followed it by drinking that of Nedra, a race horse belonging to His Lordship, which was to—er—perform in some race on the morrow.

And after that my memory becomes a trifle dimmed, except for dancing with dear Mr. Pegg. It was a species of quadrille, I recall, except that we seemed to be doing it alone. There was great applause, so it must have been successful, and I remember Cousin Abby exclaiming, "Just see what Europe does for us Boston girls!" but that was only her jealousy because of Mr. Pegg's stealing my slipper.

My entire being was diffused with a marvelous sense of well-being, and I made an engagement to ride muleback with Sir Anthony next morning at ten o'clock—indeed to ride with him at ten precisely every morning for the remainder of our sojourn upon the Riviera. And this was the more remarkable inasmuch as I had never ridden upon any animal whatsoever and have a peculiar aversion to mules. But at the time nothing seemed difficult. It was a wonderful night.

[Pg 116]

I completely forgot my charge; or when I thought of her at all it was only to recall that she was in safe hands, if not arms, and to pursue my own amusement. Then abruptly and most annoyingly the party was over. I can't think why they wanted to end it. I, for one, was not in the least ready to go home. But once out in the open air I had a dim realization that all was not quite well with me. I became possessed of a sudden desire to be alone, and a distaste for allowing either Peaches or her father to see me until I was in some way different from the way I was at the moment. And actuated by this motive I managed with uncanny cunning to elude my party and find our automobile ahead of the other members of the family. Richard, the chauffeur, was sitting in it alone, and I begged him for assistance.

"Dicky," I said, "I want to go right back to the hotel an' get my handkerfish. You take me, and come back for the resh."

"Lit to the eyelids!" exclaimed Richard.

I haven't the faintest idea of what the boy meant, but he was most helpful, I will say that. He got me into the car, and somehow we reached the hotel. The wind in my face had revived me and I managed by the exercise of great dignity to give a sufficient appearance of self-reliance. Richard, the chauffeur, left me with reluctance, but it was necessary for him to hurry back at once for Mr. Pegg.

[Pg 117]

I experienced no difficulty in reaching my floor of the hotel, but once there I realized to my annoyance that I had forgotten my key. I somehow disliked the idea of calling upon the office for assistance, and determined to chance the door being unlocked. It was possible at any rate.

The corridor was a long one—altogether too long and with too many doors in it. I remember thinking Mr. Pegg ought to speak to the management about it in the morning. But after some

hesitation I selected my own door, opened it without difficulty and entered, to face the two rascals of men whom I had tripped up in the London theater.

"What are you doing in my room?" I demanded.

"Madam, this is not your room," said the one with the mustache. And as he spoke I dimly realized that though it was an hour when most persons are in bed, both were dressed—even to hats and gloves. And they seemed profoundly disturbed at my appearance.

"It is my room!" I insisted, sitting down by the door, which remained open. "It's my room, and I'd like you to explain what you are doing in it."

"Madam," said the other imploringly, "you are mistaken. I assure you this room is ours. I can prove it—"

"I don't want to dispute you," I replied with dignity, "but leave my room at once!"

I don't know how long we sat there arguing but it seemed like months. And then all at once I heard Peaches' voice behind me.

"Good heavens! What are you doing there, Free Talbot?" she said, striding in and seizing me by the shoulder. [Pg 118]

"I'm trying to put these brigands out of my room!" I said. "Don't interfere, my dear!"

"But it's not your room!" shrieked Peaches. "Oh, pa, come help me to get my chaperon out of these strange men's room!"

Mr. Pegg was close behind her, and as she spoke I realized that she was quite right. I got up with dignity and left, accompanied by the Peggs, and the next thing I knew somebody was putting ice on my forehead, and it needed it.

I opened my eyes, feeling very ill, and there was Peaches, in street clothes. It was broad noon and she had been crying. I felt as though I—as though all of us—had been going through vast experiences of misery for ages and ages. With a tremendous effort I struggled to a sitting posture in the bed, and addressed my charge.

"Peaches," I said, "I saw you kissing that young man last night! Now, my dear, though I feel very ill this morning—I think I must have eaten something at Abby's last night that disagreed with me—still, I am well enough to protest at your behavior!"

Peaches stared at me for a moment and then burst into unaccountable laughter.

"Free!" she said. "I hope we can get you home a fit woman to take up your foreign missions work. We'll have no back talk from you to-day!"

And then she suddenly burst into tears, throwing herself on the bed and sobbing hysterically. Now thoroughly alarmed I forgot my own wretchedness and comforted her as best I could.

"My dear, my dear!" I said. "Don't take on so! What if you did kiss him? There is no real harm done! You love each other! You can be married soon. You have everything in the world to be happy about!" [Pg 119]

Slowly Peaches straightened up to her glorious height and dried her eyes on the cold towel from my head.

"Free," she sniffed, "Sandy has gone! Gone, do you get that? After our promising to marry each other, after his dating up Pa to talk it over this afternoon, after promising to come and take me to lunch and to buy a ring this noon—gone without a word except this."

Dramatically she handed me a note written in a clear firm hand. I read it as well as my throbbing head would allow.

"Dear Alicia: I regret that I shall be unable to keep my engagement. Unforeseen circumstances have arisen which make me realize I have been living in a fool's paradise. Forgive me and God bless you.

"SANDRO DI MONTEVENTI."

"His things are gone from his hotel," she said bitterly. "He's not coming back!"

"Nonsense!" I said as vigorously as Nature permitted. "Nonsense. No man could have got such a kiss and forgotten it. Once engaged to you, always engaged to you. Peaches—he'll be back this evening."

"If he does it'll be in chains!" said Peaches. "You see, he shot a man at the depot—winged him as the train moved out. It was your friend of the black mustache whom you were visiting with last night!"

VIII

[Pg 120]

One of the most annoying things which the outbreak of the war of 1914 did was to completely ruin our tour of Europe.

We had planned to visit Belgium, where Mr. Pegg intended to launch some citrus project or

other, and afterward make a tour of Germany. And, of course, that ungentlemanly, uncalled-for war entirely upset our plans. To say that it was an annoyance is to put it mildly. I was terribly provoked, especially as my collection of the flora of Europe was far from complete. I had been gathering specimens whenever opportunity afforded, pressing them, and pasting them in a blank book. Then I would write in the proper names, both Latin and popular, in a neat lettering of black ink picked out with red. It promised to be a most interesting souvenir of my trip and was intended as a gift for Euphemia. But the interruption of this small personal enterprise was, of course, only one of the many annoyances which the outbreak of the war occasioned.

It was terrible that Peaches should be cut off in the midst of her education, and terrible, too, that I should have the prospect of a return to Boston staring me in the face. Also Peaches needed diversion. Ever since the disappearance of the duke she had drooped like a—well like a eucalyptus tree, let us say, though she, who as a rule was so free in pouring out exact statements regarding her inmost emotions, was absolutely silent on this most interesting subject. I had fully expected that she would make a sort of confessor of me and postpone my nightly slumbers to the point of ultimate endurance upon every possible occasion, as she had during what I may call the chauffeur epoch, when she imagined herself in love with Richard. But from the day of the duke's disappearance she became singularly reticent about her emotions, and as is always the case with a woman who refuses to allow herself to talk, it made her quite ill, though she kept up and about and all that.

[Pg 121]

Mr. Pegg, Abby and myself consulted about what was the best course to take, and after failing utterly to elicit any information from the police regarding the crime, if any, of which our gallant Sandy was accused, we tried the government officials, the American consul, and even went so far as to drive to the homestead of the Monteventi, in hope of obtaining a clew as to what had caused this mysterious performance. But in no direction was any information to be gained.

The castle of the missing duke was closed—a desolate, half-ruined place it was—the villagers proved as dumb as the authorities, and we concluded that they were so for the same reason—to wit, because they knew nothing. If only some definite fact concerning Sandro could have been ascertained even though it had been to his detriment, Alicia's mind would have been given an opportunity at least of escaping the thought of him by a definite rejection. The terrible uncertainty of the cause of his action was what troubled her the most, I felt sure.

But having failed to gain any real information we had simply to conclude that either Sandro was mixed up in some private feud or that the police were just too reticent for anything. Foreign police are that way—not a bit like democratic America, where, Richard, the chauffeur, assured me, the police statements to the newspapers are the native criminals' most reliable source of information.

[Pg 122]

Well, at any rate, as we could get hold of nothing to tell Peaches either for her comfort or disillusionment we conspired for her diversion. And just as I had arranged to take her upon an exhaustive tour of the cathedral towns of Germany that annoying war broke out and spoiled everything. A rush of appreciation of America seemed all at once to overwhelm even the most ardent tourists, and Mr. Pegg did not escape being affected by the contagion. With his usual decisiveness we were told to pack for home, and then I was summoned for the private interview with him which I knew was inevitable, and to which I looked forward with dread, as it could hardly mean anything except my return ticket to Boston.

We were at Nice at the moment and Mr. Pegg awaited my coming upon the balcony of the royal suite of the hotel. He was chewing a cigar and very serious about it—our interview, that is. As I appeared he gave me a curious look which took me in from my newly waved hair to the tips of my high-heeled slippers, and I do verily believe that he observed them for the first time. My dear father used to say that men always see things suddenly or not at all, and this was one of those cases. Mr. Pegg always saw very clearly what was going on in his own mind, but perception of outside things seemed to be, as it were, cumulative.

However, though he made no remark upon my appearance I saw him change his mind about something or other in the transparent manner so common in men, and he abandoned the overworked cigar.

[Pg 123]

"Miss Talbot," he began, "in a couple of hours more or less we are going to be in the refugee, or immigrant class, because we are fortunate enough to be able to go home steerage, which is a damn sight better than not going home at all. And what I mean to say is that I think it would be awfully good for you to spend a few months in California. It would sort of round out your European experiences by giving you a real genuine standard of comparison—show you a country worth talking about. So I suggest that you stick by this outfit and take a little graft of Boston culture out to the home ranch for us, where maybe we can improve some of the wild stock with it."

This was so different from what I had anticipated—the polite apology for the war's having interfered with our trip and being so sorry that we must part, and so on—that I could not refrain from an outburst of appreciation.

"Oh, Mr. Pegg!" I exclaimed, clasping my hands in delight. "How truly wonderful! Indeed, I shall be most pleased to remain in your employ and to see Golden California. The more especially as dear Alicia needs me to look after her in her affliction! I accept!"

"Good!" said Mr. Pegg, beginning upon a fresh cigar, a sure sign that our business was at an end. "Good! And you can get a lot of specimens for that dried-flower morgue of yours out there, too, if the Germans don't put us to picking seaweed instead, on the way home!"

But the Germans didn't.

Abandoning Europe was a relief for many reasons. There was Cousin Abby, whom we left behind, for one thing, and I confess I admired her attitude and encouraged it. You see she had been traveling with us, and Mr. Pegg had quite unnecessarily, I thought, offered to get her back to America. But Abby was firm in her refusal. A strange fiery look came into her eyes and her head went up like—like a battle horse, I do declare.

[Pg 124]

"No, thanks awf'ly, old dear!" she said. "But I'm off to San Remo. That's home now. I've lived there twenty years and it's part of me. We'll go into this war any day, and somebody has to be there to see that it's on the side of the Allies!"

It was extremely noble of her, or, as Peaches put it, thoroughly sporting. And so she left us, and we all upheld her in so doing, I'm sure. It was a fine sacrifice and we all admire the spectacle of a sacrifice, especially when some close friend is making it, if you understand me.

Well, so much for the war. At least so far as it concerned us for a long time. The next phase which directly affects my story is my own first impression of the golden state, which began of course when our train left Chicago on the Santa Fe. I don't know why, but the West seems to reach East that far. Perchance I am mistaken and the Western influence really begins at Buffalo, but at that point I was not in a state of mind to make the usual traveler's observations, being wholly obsessed with the problem of trying to obtain a little privacy in a sleeping car. After the first night I entirely abandoned the hope, and therefore was more sensitive to other impressions. A great many people had, it seems, decided to go to California that week, and the war had necessitated Mr. Pegg's immediate return to the coast, as he called it, though I would have said we had landed upon the only real coast—well, at any rate, he had to go on at once, and Peaches insisted that we all go with him, but we were unable to obtain staterooms, and Mr. Pegg's attempt to buy up an entire car was a complete failure. Indeed he was able to get only three lower berths, with the result that Richard, the chauffeur, was parked above me. The term is his own. I should have said, to follow out his chosen symbolism, that he was parked, but with the engine running, and not too well throttled down, either. In other words, he snored; and I think I have mentioned that he had an extremely competent nose. Of course that trip in the steerage had inured me somewhat to hardship, but I had not anticipated that America would be so quickly affected by the war—or so slow in noticing that it was affected.

[Pg 125]

At any rate, my real observations did not begin until we left Chicago behind us, and then, not unnaturally, the first thing I observed was Peaches' extraordinary behavior.

She was not flirting. The fact speaks for itself and gains in importance when I make mention of the circumstance that there were no less than two very attractive strange men in our car, and that one of them was a well-known motion-picture actor. But Peaches paid them absolutely no attention despite that before we were two hours out Richard was growling at them like an angry watchdog—usually a sufficient reason for Peaches to exercise her love of tormenting him. Instead she sat by the window and stared out into the swift-moving blackness.

Mr. Pegg at once disappeared into a den where I have a deep-rooted suspicion some sort of card game was in progress, and he hardly reappeared again, except for food, during the remainder of the trip.

[Pg 126]

At any rate the lack of necessity for actively chaperoning my charge left me free to make notes upon that part of America which was foreign to me. Indeed, I was glad of the opportunity, for though I had been several times from Boston to Plymouth, and had once visited an aunt in Philadelphia, I felt there was yet much of my native land for me to see. And there was. Very much.

How very, very much I had really no conception in advance, nor can any language adequately describe it. To do so would be like reading the unabridged dictionary aloud. Indeed, the term "unabridged" is the only one which conveys any sense of the country one crosses. And it was so amazing to find it really existed. One had been told about Kansas plains and the northern Arizona deserts, but the statements made by travelers were somehow not convincing. Nobody's statements about travel ever are. But now I saw those, as I may call them, illimitable spaces and stupendous mountains. There were actually Indians! Upon my word of honor, though not nearly so realistic as the ones who used to sell worm medicine in Bigelo's drug store window on Bank Street. Still they were undoubtedly genuine, and even accepted a little money from me at Albuquerque. It was most thrilling.

I felt singularly small and incompetent and ignorant, whirling along through this infinite territory. It made me ashamed, curiously enough, to realize that I had ever thought that the original thirteen colonies were America; that I had actually once entertained the supposition that that portion of the country situated west of Buffalo was something to be vaguely apologetic for! It made Europe seem small and insignificant, with its toy railways and funny little huddled towns and neatly apportioned fields—even its terrible present situation; or rather made America seem enormously safe, sane and resourceful.

[Pg 127]

I had always been proud of being a New Englander, and now I began to be impressed with the stupendous fact of being an American. In one thing only was I disappointed.

My dear father used to say that absence made the heart grow fonder because there was no reality present to hamper the imagination. And I believe that this must be particularly true of Californians.

All during my time with them in Europe, indeed since my joining them, I had heard little

comment on anything European from either Peaches or her father except in disparaging comparison to the Californian equivalent. And now upon the train, from the moment of our departure from the Grand Central Terminal, everything I admired elicited a chorused response, "Wait until you see California!"

Naturally I waited. In the nature of things I could not do otherwise. But happily the railroad train did not. Meanwhile I existed in excited anticipation of a degree scarcely to be endured. Never shall I forget the first morning when casaba melons appeared in the dining car, and Peaches and Mr. Pegg exchanged a half-pleased, half-contemptuous glance over the first spoonful. To me it tasted like nectar but—

"Santa Clara fruit!" said Mr. Pegg in the same tone in which Euphemia might have said "Those common people!"

"Yes!" nodded Peaches. "Wait until you have a San Bernardino melon, Free!"

[Pg 128]

"Can it be possible that California is divided against itself?" I asked, aghast.

"You said it!" spoke up Richard, the chauffeur, who had doffed his uniform and imperceptibly slipped back into his earlier relationship with the family, even to the point of eating with us; a fact which seemed curiously without offense. "You said it, Aunt Mary! Los Angeleans are the Smiths of California, and San Franciscans are the Talbots. And yet I come from Los Angeles myself."

"I should say so, if I get you right!" exclaimed Peaches. "Why, Free, southern California has nothing but the climate—absolutely nothing! While San Francisco is full of—of—"

"Fogs," said Richard promptly; "and earthquakes!"

"It was a fire!" said Peaches fiercely.

"Hey, you!" interrupted Mr. Pegg, laying down his Kansas City paper. "Hey, you two—you was both raised in Oroville ever since I knew you."

"But, dad, I don't want Free to get a wrong idea about the south," replied Peaches. "You know it's just one vast mixture of real estate and movie enterprises."

"Better than living among a lot of hop pickers!" retorted Dick. "Burning up in summer and getting your trees frozen in winter!"

"Thank the Lord!" said Mr. Pegg reverently. "There is some doubt as to if I was born in Santa Monica or Oroville. It has kep' me unprejudiced, what with owning orchards in both ends of the State. Let me tell you, Miss Freedom, that our golden land is a bower and a horn of plenty from one end to the other. It is all good enough for this native son!"

[Pg 129]

Now, of course, when people discourse to you in such a fashion of any land you expect it to be green, at least. You anticipate great groves of trees, wooded hills and flowery dales with rushing streams, o'erhung with primrose and—er—tortillas and other native fruits and flowers.

But California was not green that particular first week in September. There were not even any trees to be seen except an occasional lonely yellow clump of cotton-wood or a thin straggling line of eucalyptus. We were headed straight for San Francisco, and from the moment when we branched north I looked in vain for redwoods such as I had seen pictures of in geography books and other printed sources of information. Indeed, I began to fear that there existed but the one redwood I had seen pictured and that it was not situated near the railroad track. At the railroad stations were a few palmettos, and as for the rest—brown—brown—brown; burned hills and almost improperly naked purple mountains. It was a shock, a disappointment beyond belief. I felt I had been deliberately misled and made game of.

But Peaches suddenly came to life. Her drooping figure had straightened and her eyes glistened. Her eager golden head turned this way and that. She seemed to see things in the barren landscape that were invisible to me.

Her father, too, was strangely affected by the fact that we had passed the State boundary line, and abandoned his game, which I discovered to have been named after a famous Boston confection called Black Jack, and stood upon the rear platform in company with other returning native sons, all looking eagerly at—something! The brown grass was all I saw.

[Pg 130]

As for Richard, the chauffeur, he had shed the last vestige of his servitude and he, too, seemed looking at something—something very beautiful. And then all at once I realized what it was. When California is wet she is green and they were looking at her through a veil of happy tears that transfigured the landscape. I ventured, most delicately, to intimate my understanding to Peaches, when to my amazement, she turned on me with a laugh.

"Think I want to see it green?" she said. "Why, it's just as beautiful when it's brown! Just as much home, just as big and bountiful and full of promise. Want to see it green? When the time comes. But do you always want New England to be green? Don't you ever want to see it white? Well!"

I thought then that I understood, but I didn't. Not until long after. But as I stood beside her, abashed, a gentleman whose acquaintance I had made when he first got on the train the evening before, and with whom I had had a most pleasant and innocent chat without either of us revealing our names, approached us with an expression of surprise.

"Peaches!" he exclaimed, flushing up to the roots of his thin gray hair. "How are you!"

"Mr. Markheim!" said my charge in her turn astonished. "When did you get aboard?"

"I'm just up from Coronado," he replied. "Got on last night! What luck to find you! What luck, what luck!"

"This is Miss Talbot, my chaperon," said Peaches sweetly. "Meet Mr. Sebastian Markheim, Free."

"We have already met!" he exclaimed blandly. "But I had no idea that——"

[Pg 131]

"We spoke in the observation car last night," I said as primly as the awkward circumstances permitted.

"Free!" exclaimed Peaches severely. "You picked him up! I tell you I'll breathe easier once I have you safely on the ranch!"

IX

[Pg 132]

My dear father used to maintain that true love seldom dies chiefly because it is so seldom born, which I take to be an aspersion upon the average love affair.

This would scarcely be fair to widows, or maidens who have been bereaved before betrothal, would it? For, of course, it is conceivable that such a one might in time recover from the shock of her loss and form a second genuine attachment. But whether I was justified in putting Peaches into the latter class or not I could not judge at the time. Because, of course, we should have been extremely lonely on the northern ranch without Mr. Markheim, especially after Richard, the chauffeur, enlisted, and dear Mr. Pegg began his increasingly frequent trips to Washington, where he had something to do with supplying the Army with fruit. The way that man constantly ran over to Washington from California was simply too—too—well, too Californian for words. For the natives of this region save time in every conceivable fashion, yet regard distance as nothing. He spent almost all of his time either there or in the southern part of the State, where his principal groves of citrus fruit were located.

At any rate we should have been tremendously lonely on the home ranch without Mr. Markheim. Really I should not have supposed that a millionaire could be so human or a *nouveau riche* so condescending, or rather, so tolerable. But I suppose his being in love with Alicia had something to do with it, for before we had been twenty-four hours at the King-Pin ranch I saw how things were.

[Pg 133]

On account of his name poor Mr. Markheim took no active part in the war, though I understand that he lent somebody a great deal of money—the Belgians or Irish or some one, I forget just who.

But at any rate he used to ride over to our place frequently every day when it wasn't twice a day, and at first Peaches would have nothing to do with him beyond mere politeness.

I settled myself to watch the progress of the affair, because I do love a lover even when I don't like him, and I felt sorry for Mr. Markheim and interested in his attentions to Peaches, though, of course, he was of an age which would have rendered his devotion to an older woman far more suitable, and I was confident that nothing could shake her fidelity to the dear duke, that handsome and romantic rascal—that is, if he was a rascal, which now seemed plain enough. But every woman loves a rascal at some time or another, and though friends and family may succeed in persuading her to give him up she goes on nursing her fondness in secret just as long as the flavor lasts.

At any rate Peaches thought only of Sandro; that was plain to any woman, and though she seldom spoke of him I could see that we never went to the little dust bin of a town for the mail but she looked for a letter in his handwriting. But she did not discuss him, even with me. And when Mr. Sebastian came over from his toy ranch she would ride with him, talk with him, swim in our pool with him or accept the little things he bought her with a sweet, gentle acceptance which brought me to the verge of tears, it was so unlike her old fiery self.

[Pg 134]

And thus we dragged through a long, long period which has nothing to do with my account of our particular affairs—the period of the war, in point of fact. I feel it is not incumbent upon me to make a record of the war though it occurred at this time, inasmuch as several quite competent persons, including Mr. Wilson and the Associated Press, have covered the matter pretty carefully and quite as accurately as I should, the more especially as I spent the entire span of the war in California, and the Golden State was curiously removed from any sense of actual warfare.

Not that I mean to say that we Californians were in any way lacking in patriotism or that we failed to do our part, for goodness knows we just about fed the entire nation, and prices didn't go up, either, the way they did in the East. You could still buy at pre-war prices in 1918, and we were so rich as a community that we could do without the scandalous increases of which we read in our week-late New York Sunday newspapers. But what I mean is that somehow war seemed to belong to the East rather than to us. And I think we worried more over Mexico than over Flanders, and who can blame us when we were so near to Mexico that we could actually see what went on there? Or the result of what went on, at least? And the European war was just like some horrid rather unconvincing nightmare which the East had got itself into and that we had in consequence to help her out of.

Peaches and I ran the home ranch, and hardly left it, after Richard's enlistment. When I reflect upon our life there it seems punctuated by two great events and nothing else, though at the time

[Pg 135]

of living through it I seemed to be in a continuous crisis, my upbringing crashing against my environment.

The first momentous occurrence to which I have referred was news of the duke. It came in a letter from Abby, who mentioned him casually in passing. The Chinese cook had brought the mail up from Oroville and Peaches and I had carried it outside to the edge of the swimming pool which Mr. Pegg had built into an angle of the ranch house, a gaunt white-painted frame building, very like a big New England farm-house, as are many of the homesteads of northern California. It was a heavenly mild late September day, with the barren hills turning faintly green already, though the rains had been tardy and scarce, and the roses in the garden had still to be irrigated regularly. The roads, hub deep with dust in summer, were bad now, honeycombed with mud holes, and the mail was late.

As I sat there with a corduroy jacket about my shoulders, my muddy boots heavy on my tired feet, and held the letter with the Italian postmark unopened for a moment in my hands it seemed as if the past four years were a dream, and the scene before me an utter unreality. At the gate to the road stood a pair of orange trees upon which the fruit was being left to ripen for home consumption. The orchards were stripped weeks earlier, for we picked green and sweated our oranges. Beyond the sentinel trees with their yellow fruit glowing like lanterns in the dark foliage, a flock of runner ducks squawked noisily in the head ditch, which had flowed by the house since the early days when Peaches' mother lived there and used to get the water for her household from it. Distantly a file of turbaned Hindu pickers, bound for a neighbor's walnut grove, passed, silhouetted against the sky, and vanished into the more overbearing outlines of a row of eucalyptus trees upon the ridge, and a pair of smartly overalled, immaculate Japanese laborers equipped like aviators, and gloved against the orange thorns, passed along the road, chattering unintelligibly, their picking equipment strapped to their shoulders like knapsacks, their sturdy boots swinging rhythmically to their chatter.

[Pg 136]

I could see all this, and the environment, which had once been as strange as a prism seen through a kaleidoscope, yet which was the only reality I had known for four years, now took on its pristine strangeness once more, and the letter in my hands brought a wave of homesickness upon me—not for Italy, but for Boston, I scarcely know why. For several moments I sat so, and then at length I opened the envelope where the censor had closed it, and read.

It sounded tired, that letter did, though, of course, it told very little, being censored.

"We are frightfully busy," Abby wrote, "but hopeful of an end to it all before long. I hope it may be true that peace is near, for we have suffered enough. We are not so gay as once we were, my dear, but just as brave. Things have changed so, and people are gone. I hear among others that our gay, mysterious and gallant Sandro was killed at — Sir Anthony told me, and he got it from Captain Silvano, whom you may remember at Mentone. Killed in a very brave bit of action, I believe, too. Ah, well! So many people are making reparation for sins known and unknown by heroic sacrifice in the war. It is the great confessional."

[Pg 137]

I did not read further just then. Something impelled me to look up. Alicia was standing in front of me with grave golden eyes, her body actually seeming to give off a magnetic force which compelled me against my will to an immediate confession of what I would have preferred to break to her in a proper fashion.

"Free!" she said too quietly. "Is he—dead?"

It was the first mention which had been made of the duke in almost a year. I had begun to think she had forgotten—or at least determined to forget. I should have known better. I handed her the letter. It was the only thing I could do. She took it and read it silently, still looking off at the purple cloud bank of the coast range with its snow patches melting into the fleece of the little clouds which seemed to rest upon them—the barren gold-and-violet mountains, so infinite, eternal, restful and inspiring. Her face was like marble and I thought of the old psalmist: "I lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my strength," and knew she would get strength from the coast range, from the infinite expanse of Nature, even as I had got it before now.

"In a very brave action," she said automatically. Then she threw her head back in a proud gesture, as though somebody had tried to strike her and failed; and without another word she turned and went into the house. I allowed her to go alone. Somehow I had gradually come to recognize a difference between Alicia and other young women of my acquaintance—and I knew that there was nothing I could say to her just then. She had the strength of those hills, or rather mountains—she was made of their very substance. I felt helpless. Besides, it was time to go through the lower orchards, where the Hindus were stripping olives in fear of a possible touch of frost, and somebody had to attend to things. So I rose, much depressed but urged by the duty before me. That was women's salvation during the war—the pressure of work to be done. And Pinto was again in Washington.

[Pg 138]

But that night Peaches became humanized. I suppose the darkness was too much for her. I was unable to endure her sobbing unless I could participate in it. And so I went into her room toward morning, and we were wretched in company. It was then that she showed me the wallet.

"Oh, my dear!" I said. "If only you had a souvenir or something of his!"

"I have!" replied poor Peaches unexpected. "I'll show it to you."

She turned on the light and reached under her tear-stained pillow—an incongruously gay figure in her striped pyjamas—and produced an envelope from which she drew a worn case of black morocco leather. It was thin and flat and no bigger than the palm of your hand.

"I have this, and two letters, and the rose he picked with the little gold knife I gave him," she said.

"What is it?" I made inquiry.

"I don't know," she said. "There's something written in Italian inside. He left it by accident on the day before he disappeared."

"By accident?" I said. "How?"

"Well, I found it on the sofa," said Peaches. "And it has his name in it. I was going to return it next day at luncheon—the luncheon to which he never came."

[Pg 139]

Then she broke down again.

"I guess it's only a Dago mileage book," she sobbed, "but it's all I've got of his! He must have used it a lot!" She buried her head in the pillow, the wallet clasped tightly to her breast, and I stole out of the room without seeing the contents. If only I had looked—insisted on looking at it then, what a lot of trouble we would have been spared! But as my dear father used to say, it is easy to be wise in retrospect. At the time I thought merely of Peaches getting a little sleep and that somebody had to get up and start the Chinaman or the foremen wouldn't get their breakfast by five o'clock, and there was still one sheltered flat of oranges to be picked.

Though the lugs were already in the orchard I knew that if we were ever to get through in time to make a complete shipment we must begin work as soon as it was light enough to see the yellow glow under the green on the fruit, and work until it was so dark that the prime oranges were indistinguishable from the unripe ones, and the Mohammedans would come out of the orchard and pray, in their heathen manner, facing where they supposed Mecca to be. Somebody had to see to things, even in time of sorrow, and I was what Peaches cryptically termed the "goat."

Mr. Kipling may not have known it, but the dawn comes up like thunder in California, too, so it is really no effort to rise early, once you are accustomed to so doing. It is a common observation that when one does get up at sunrise one wonders why one does not do it always. And for almost three years such had been my continuous habit.

I set about my duties this morning, however, with a heavy heart, for I anticipated a long siege with Peaches and her grief. But by the time the foremen had gone to their sections and I myself had ridden the rounds of the various orchards to see that all was well, and given the Chinaman instructions about the meals, which instructions he would later pretend not to have heard, and had ridden over to the sluice at the top of the head ditch to see why the new feed to the seedling flat wasn't working properly, and taken a look at the flock of turkeys which I had imported to keep the grasshoppers down and which had lately been depleted by coyotes, I returned to my second breakfast; and there was Peaches already seated at table, well-groomed in her riding clothes, and prepared to accompany me to the packing sheds at the railroads.

[Pg 140]

She was a trifle pale perhaps, and rather quieter than ever, but perfectly composed, and even smiled a little as I sat down beside her and attacked my meal.

"I'm all set now, Free," she whispered. "I'll just do my bit, as he did his."

And then we got out the car and went to town. I drove, at her request, and between bumps and mud holes watched her out of one corner of my eye for any signs of a breakdown. But none came, either then or later in the long sheds where the sweated fruit roared down the channel of the separator, falling into the bins like golden hail, which the wives and daughters of the neighboring ranchers stood swiftly packing; a most competent lot of females, very swift and precise and earning a good bit of pin money thus every year.

Peaches stood outside all day, checking up the lugs as they arrived, arranging about freight rates, overseeing the allotment of box cars to the various growers, and generally doing a man's job. And never once during the twelve months which followed did I know her to fail in her work—her magnificent constitution helping, no doubt, to pull her through. But I could see that a permanent change had taken place in her from the day of Abby's letter. She was no longer the madcap, and though she was even more beautiful she was different—and through love, the great tamer—as Blake would have it.

[Pg 141]

This was the first incident to which I have referred as punctuating the monotony of the war for us. The second occurred more than a year later, in November, 1918, when we, like many another group of ranchers throughout the country, thought the town hall was on fire when all the time it was only the armistice.

Mr. Markheim, Pinto and Alicia and myself were indoors, an unusually cold snap having offered us the treat of an open fire, a not unmixed pleasure by reason of our being under some anxiety about the trees. But on the whole it was what some modern poet whose name I cannot at the moment recall has termed the end of a perfect day.

To begin with, I had dispatched three pounds of wool to Euphemia, whom Galadia, my only source of information about my sister, had written was doing great work for the Red Cross; her chief natural gift, that of knitting, had suddenly become of immense importance since the outbreak of the war, and she had to her credit and the honor of the family three hundred pair of socks. The achievement appeared almost foreign to me, inasmuch as I had not knitted any socks since that momentous pair at Monte Carlo, a surprising faculty for a more active existence having developed in me during my sojourn on the ranch. At any rate I had sent out the wool, finished my last jar of marmalade, of which I had made an experimental thousand for a market which Mr. Pegg intended the development of, and Mr. Markheim had returned from a visit East in company

[Pg 142]

with Pinto. Peaches had that day succeeded in breaking a pony she had long desired as a saddle horse and had hitherto been unsuccessful with. Mr. Pegg had a special design for the marmalade jars—a crystal orange, of the natural size and shape, the preserved fruit to furnish the color, and he and I were most enthusiastic over it.

Mr. Markheim also credited himself with a successful trip, though from a wholly different cause. It appeared that he had at length contrived to install in his house a picture which he had long coveted, and this picture was none other than the Madonna of the Lamp, for which he had paid five hundred thousand dollars. Since his purchase of it the picture had been stored, and it seemed to me a strange time to trouble with getting it out. But Sebastian Markheim, with the fervor of the true collector and the madness which seems the hall-mark of his kind, was apparently oblivious of this circumstance and became wrapt in his description of it.

"You must have seen it in Vienna," he said. "Good heavens, don't say you have seen photographs of it! You cannot imagine the beauty of the thing itself. I have given directions for the remodeling of the south wall of my library in the Ossining house for its occupancy. It will hang all alone on that wall—it's only a small picture, you know, so I have had Hasbrock, the architect, design some panels to encircle it I hope it is going to please you, Alicia."

"What?" said Mr. Pegg twirling round suddenly from the bowl of ripe olives with which he was occupied. "What's that? Why should Alicia be pleased?" [Pg 143]

"She's going to live there with it!" said Markheim. "She promised this afternoon!"

"Oh, no!" I said getting to my feet. But nobody seemed to hear me.

"Yes, father," said Alicia. Then Pinto's face broke into a sort of crooked smile and he held out his hands to both of them.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said. "Think of my Peaches picking out a friend of her father's! Why, Markheim, you must be somewhere near my own age!"

"Why, pa, how rude!" said Alicia. "Aren't you going to kiss me? And you too, Free! Stop standing there like a dummy! People get married all the time—there's nothing unusual about it, you poor nuts! Come on, congratulate us!"

Well, of course, I recovered myself as best I could, and pecked her on the cheek. But I didn't feel my congratulations—I simply couldn't feel them. To marry that old man. And a foreigner! And a German Swiss! And everything! It was too dreadful! Nothing could make me feel that she was doing it for any reason except pity and because he had nagged her into it with his ceaseless attentions. Of course we had nothing against him, absolutely nothing, because after all being a millionaire art collector is not in itself strictly criminal. But with the memory of that beautiful romance in Italy still fresh in my own mind I could not understand it—I simply could not; and every fiber of my being resented it. Youth and age! It was all wrong. She had a silly notion that her heart was dead, and that it didn't matter what she did. That if it gave Sebastian happiness to marry her—why, he was good and kind and rich and cultured and famous, and why not give joy since one could no longer experience it? [Pg 144]

I could see in a flash what had gone on in her simple, honest, generous mind, and it nearly drove me wild, while all the time I had to stand there grinning and patting her on the shoulder, and saying how wonderful it all was, when in reality I wanted to drag her out of the room and shake her for being such a great silly fool, and force her to stop it before anyone else heard of her folly and she found herself in the complications of public knowledge of her engagement.

Instead of which I stood round and admired the wonderful five-carat diamond ring which Markheim produced, and behaved like an idiot generally.

"Well, well, when is it to be?" Mr. Pegg wanted to know.

Alicia turned her big eyes slowly from her marvelous jewel to her father's puzzled face.

"I have promised Sebastian," she said slowly, "to marry him as soon as the war is over!"

Her tone had, to my ears, the expectancy of a long reprieve.

And it was at that minute that the fire bells began to ring.

You can be sure we all rushed out at that, crying, "Where is it? What is the matter?" and many other similar exclamations natural to the situation. But at first nobody seemed to know. The Chinese cook came out, frying pan in hand, and began running round in circles. The hands were soon straggling in from their camp in the gulch by the river. Somebody, Mr. Pegg, I think, tried the telephone, but could get no answer. By this time almost everybody on the ranch had assembled before the house, shivering with the frost and searching the sky for signs of the incendiary glare, but in vain. An automobile dashed by down the Letterbox road with two prospectors in it. One was firing a gun like mad and he yelled something unintelligible at us in passing but ignored our invitation to stop. [Pg 145]

Then from the direction of the town a flivver emerged out of the swiftly falling dusk, and as it stopped in front of our gate a man in the uniform of an American captain jumped down with the aid of his uninjured arm, the other being supported by a sling, and came running toward us, flinging his cap into the air, the lights from our porch gleaming upon his excited face and upon the decorations on his breast.

"Victory!" he shouted. "Victory! Schoolhouse fire? Hell! The armistice was signed at two o'clock to-day!"

It was Richard, the chauffeur, and I assure you that it was at that moment that I recognized the strong family resemblance and decided that he might after all be a Talbot—one of our Talbots.

You can imagine the wild riot into which the news and the bearer of it threw us. I cannot describe it. Everyone went crazy and I have a blurred recollection of kissing several persons, the Chinaman among them. But only one thing remains clearly in my mind—Alicia standing like a stone in a corner of the veranda, her white face lifted to the rising moon, and Markheim running toward her with burning words which seemed to fall upon deaf ears.

"Alicia, Alicia, it's the end of the war!" he was shouting.

X

[Pg 146]

I recall upon one occasion my dear father having said that love in a cottage was better than politeness in a mansion, and this came at once to mind upon the occasion of our visit to Sebastian Markheim's palace on the banks of the upper section of the Hudson River.

This took place just six months after that wonderful night when my dear nephew, as I was now convinced he was, returned, so to speak, with the armistice in his pocket. Sebastian, as I was now instructed to call Mr. Markheim, had desired us to come sooner, in order that Peaches might herself assist in selecting the plans and furnishings incident to the remodeling of what was to be her home.

But Peaches was reluctant to go. Of course there was a good deal of readjustment to be done on all her father's ranches, and while he was in the south, where the big orchards were, we set in order the home ranch, which had been practically in our charge for a year and a half, and she gave as excuse for the delay the necessity for making these readjustments herself. Richard was to be left in complete charge and she busied herself quite unnecessarily in showing him a thousand details. Every week she would promise to be ready, and when the time came she would have discovered something that nobody else could take care of, which was all nonsense, because a citrus ranch practically takes care of itself during the winter months. But by hook and crook she held us off until April, and then at last we were ready to go.

[Pg 147]

I will state that I for one was unreservedly eager to go home—to go East. I was, in point of fact, so excited at the prospect that on the night before our departure I found myself unable to compose myself to slumber, and rising from my uneasy couch I donned a robe and ventured forth from my bedchamber, which was upon the ground floor.

The moonlight, which flooded the garden, gave it an uncanny distorted aspect, and all at once as I sat there, huddled upon a bench close to the wall of the house, I seemed to see the ranch and its surroundings with the same eyes which envisioned it upon my arrival so long ago. This sudden clarity of vision was doubtless due to the subconscious influence of my impending departure. At any rate the place, which I had grown so accustomed to that I beheld it only with the blindness of familiarity, seemed once more the impossibly crude wilderness that it appeared to be upon my arrival.

For in the northern part of California there is little of the induced luxuriance of the South. There is something of the Eastern farmer's fight with the elements and a Nature that is not always overly kind or utterly dependable, and our garden was not a thing of lovely lawns, dense shrubs and misty glades. Far from it. Our flower beds were as practically irrigated as our orchards, standing deep in mud and lifting their wonderful blossoms from the mire we so religiously provided for them. There was none of the trimness of an Eastern estate about our more than practical, enterprising organization. Rather it bore the general aspect of Boston Common after an August holiday. It was, in plain truth, shockingly untidy, and I was horrified to realize that even I, who had been so carefully reared by the immaculate Euphemia, had made only the most feeble sort of effort to tidy up. I had been unable to see the molehills for the mountains, as one might say. But now, with the thought of the concentrated, condensed East before me, I perceived the unevenness of our paths, the forgotten bundle of old papers outside the storehouse, the broken gate which everyone cursed at but forgot to mend; and the olive and orange clad hills beyond grew dim in my mind's eye even as they formed but indistinguishable black patches in the cloud-changing moonlight. A deep longing for my own kind of living swept over me, and I even went so far as to experience a desire for Euphemia's breakfast room on Chestnut Street, and the mended table linen—the careful little things of life grown dear through years of painstakingly careful usage.

[Pg 148]

Moved by this overwhelming impulse I was on the verge of rising and gathering up that disgracefully untidy bundle of papers and carrying it to the trash bin where it belonged, thus at once satisfying a normal impulse and proving to myself that my upbringing had not been in vain, when I became aware that the window above my head had been opened softly and that someone—Peaches, without a doubt, since that was her chamber—was standing there, crying softly.

My first impulse was to speak—to go to her with what comfort I was capable of offering, but having for an instant refrained I could not do so. Since the announcement of her betrothal to Markheim a wall had sprung up between us as far as her intimate life was concerned. Indeed she seemed to have withdrawn into herself curiously, though I doubt that anyone realized it as keenly as did I.

And then having failed to speak immediately I found myself in an awkward predicament. Should I move or not? I had no desire to eavesdrop for the confidence she withheld, and yet I felt it my bounden duty as her chaperon and guardian and older woman generally to know all about her by one means or another, for her own good, and not out of mere female curiosity. And so allowing my sense of responsibility to conquer my delicacy I kept very still, and before long my diligence was rewarded.

[Pg 149]

"A clean sweep!" whispered Peaches at her window. "No use kidding myself. I'll make the break clean. It's the only thing to do!"

There was a short silence punctuated only by a few sniffs, and then an object flew through the air over my head and landed in the pool with a splash. The window above was closed with a snap. Whatever ritual she had been at was over. But not so the fulfillment of my duty as her protectress.

No sooner had I made sure that she was not going to change her mind and come down after it, than I crept stealthily to the water's edge, having carefully noted the very spot where the object fell, and kneeling on the concrete basin's brim, greatly to the detriment of that portion of my anatomy which bore the weight, being clad only for private life, I fished determinedly for the best part of half an hour, my sleeves rolled up but not escaping the effects of my earnest endeavor, and my curls getting thoroughly soaked.

Fortunately Peaches' aim, usually so accurate and far reaching in the pursuit of the national sport of baseball, or in any other emergency such as reaching a high-hung apple, had fallen a little short this time, her secret having hit the shallow end of the pond. And so it was that after a very considerable period of effort I did retrieve the object, and retreated with it to the seclusion of my room.

[Pg 150]

Once there I lit the lamp, drew the curtains, locked the door and proceeded with my duty still further. It was a terribly moist little bundle, done up in a silk handkerchief and weighted with the bronze paper-weight I had given Peaches for Christmas. But I was too much interested to mind this slight. For inside the bundle were two letters, already a mere pulpy mass from the soaking they had sustained, a brittle something which might once have been a rose, and the duke's wallet!

The latter was still intact, but before examining it I made a little fire on the hearth, and by diligent coaxing managed to consume the remnants of the other souvenirs. They were no one's affairs except that of the lovers and no other eyes should behold them unbidden. And when they were quite concealed in the ashes of the fireplace I returned to the light and examined the wallet carefully. It seemed to me that there simply must be more to the matter than appeared. In any of those books which had so deep an influence upon my early thinking the discoverer of such a wallet would have surprised a jewel of value, secret documents popularly referred to as 'the papers,' or a marriage certificate which cleared the honor of the hero's mother, or something equally vital. And I must confess that I, in opening my find, rather anticipated some such discovery, but my expectations were doomed to disappointment, for it was in very truth what Peaches had suggested—a mileage ticket of some sort made out in Sandro's name!

I will say that this end to my exciting evening was a trifle flat, but as my dear father used to say, our chief pleasure lies in anticipation and no disappointment in the event can cheat us of that. So I simply decided to put the thing carefully away in the bottom of my reticule in case it was ever needed. What with the war and all, one never can tell who is going to turn up a hero; and just think what souvenirs of Rupert Brooke, for example, are worth to-day, not to mention Napoleon and General Grant, and so forth, whose hero-value has, of course, been augmented with age.

[Pg 151]

Well, at any rate, that was all there was to it at the time. I slept the sleep of duty well done, because I was determined to take care of Peaches in spite of herself, and the next morning rose refreshed, to make the early train for San Francisco, where we were to join Mr. Pegg and turn our faces eastward.

The house which Sebastian Markheim had remodeled for his bride-to-be was already a sumptuous structure worthy of the famous collection of art treasures which it housed, and his efforts in altering it had been bent rather in the direction of improving its livableness and making it a cheerier spot to which to bring a young wife. The object of our visit was that Peaches be given the opportunity of making it completely to her liking in advance of her possession of it, and incidentally to make the acquaintance of her future neighbors, and of Mr. Markheim's set generally.

He had planned a large house party as the means of introducing his fiancée to his social world, and she intended to procure her trousseau in New York during the intervals of gayety. Mr. Pegg was enchanted at the prospect thus opened up before him, and I was myself much elated at the thought of experiencing some real social life once more, for Abby's hospitality in dear old Italy, so lavish and yet in such excellent good form, had given me a taste for the gaieties my restricted youth had lacked. Even Peaches was gay, though not as of yore, but rather with a mature, stately gayety, and her manner toward me had become positively motherly.

[Pg 152]

"There now, Free!" she soothed me one day when I had expressed a mild concern about her state of mind. "There now, Free, don't you worry about me! We all have to grow up sometime, don't we? Can't stay young plants forever—especially we women. Comes a time when we got to be grafted on to old stock and get ready for bearing—eh? Well, that's me, old thing!"

I was shocked at her indelicacy and did not hesitate to say so.

"If that is how you regard your forthcoming nuptials," I said stiffly, "you ought to dissolve your betrothal. One should marry only for love—for love alone!"

"Oh, should they?" said Peaches. "That's all you know about it. I'm very fond of Mr. Mark—of Sebastian, and he is the typical good husband."

"But you don't love him!" I protested firmly.

"I love him as much as I am likely to love anyone," responded Peaches—like a young Portia, so stately and serious. "And even if he is half a head shorter than I am he has a kind heart and he's a gentleman."

"And not over sixty years old!" I retorted. "Oh, Peaches, do you really want to do it?"

Suddenly she was serious. The defensively bantering light went out of her changeful eyes.

"Don't, Free!" she pleaded. "Yes, I do want to. I want to be a reasonable being—to make the best life I can for myself since I must go on living. I don't want to be a coward. I am still young and I haven't seen much of the world. Riches, art treasures, cultured people, and things—social position—there must be joy in these things or folks would not struggle for them so! And since they must be filling up the emptiness in a whole lot of lives I'm going to have a try at them too. Don't be afraid for me. I know just what I am doing. I know that I shall never care again. But I can like. And I can live, and I'm going to use my old beau to help me get the most out of life that I can when—when—well, you know, only don't say it, please!"

[Pg 153]

She was wonderful. So big and beautiful and full of health and common sense. I could not but admire her, though, of course, a few maidenly tears and vows of lifelong fidelity to the heroic dead would have been more suitable. But things had already gone too far for that. At the time the above-recorded conversation took place we were standing upon the steps of the Ritz in New York, waiting for the car which was to convey us up the river. Mr. Markheim had not expected us for another week and so hadn't been at the hotel to meet us, but was sending his chauffeur.

And in a way Peaches' words reassured me. After all one must eventually resign oneself to fate, and if one had the good sense to take fate by the horns and as Peaches would say "beat him to it"—why, so much the better. We could all settle down to watch her live happily enough ever after if her program worked out.

But would it? Despite her assurance I felt a faint misgiving. My dear father used always to say: "Never you girls marry until Mister Right comes along." And we were brought up to honor and obey our parents—with the result that at the respective ages of fifty and sixty we girls were still single. However, I digress.

[Pg 154]

In my youth, following the precepts of my father and seeking knowledge of the world through the medium of literature, I came upon the works of a lady of rank whose writings had for me the greatest fascination. As to what her actual name was I have to this day remained in ignorance, and her title, The Duchess, is all that I identify her by. But this estimable lady, while somewhat given to the recounting of scandalous episodes and the misfortunes peculiar to innocent maidens, had a wealth of descriptive power when she undertook the description of rich and aristocratic mansions or the interiors of castles of the less modest variety. But nothing ever recorded by her, not set forth for public inspection in the Boston Museum, could compare with the sumptuousness of Mr. Markheim's establishment.

I had been prepared for something very fine, but this gorgeous replica of a famous Italian villa built upon terraces, its lovely low white façades rising in a symmetrical group one above the other, the whole nestling into the budding verdure of the hillside, its formal gardens descending step by step almost to the broad sweep of the Hudson below, was a veritable dream-palace.

And the interior! Words almost fail me when I seek to describe it. Perhaps the most fitting thing I can say of it is that it was a home good enough for Peaches. Her great height, her gold-and-marble beauty, here found at last a fitting habitat. And then when I saw that little, comparatively speaking, Markheim man trotting about in front of her and giving her the place with a gesture as he displayed each treasure in turn, I felt sick and faint in my mind. And yet he was most kind and had never given me the least cause to criticize him, and certainly the house was enough to tempt any girl. I sighed, however, to think of the day when she would be married and living there.

[Pg 155]

"Mr. Markheim—Sebastian, I mean," I said—Mr. Pegg and I followed in the wake of the happy couple as they made the tour of the house—"Sebastian, this place looks as if you had dug up the rich heart of Italy and transplanted it to America!"

Sebastian laughed.

"You have the right idea, Miss Freedom! The right idea—yes!" he exclaimed with pride. "More than half my collection is Italian—and if I do so say myself, it has taken a lot of patience and trouble to gather it—not to speak of the cost in money. They have a strict law against taking objects of art out of their country, you know, and it's been nip and tuck getting hold of a lot of this stuff—smuggled of course. Oh, don't look so shocked! If it's genuine it's smuggled—at the Italian end. But one doesn't call attention to the fact except in the privacy of one's own family!"

"It sure is swell!" said Mr. Pegg.

Sebastian laughed again—a sound which never got him favor with me—and opened the door into the newest addition to the house—the library wing, which he had remodeled for the especial purpose of housing the Madonna of the Lamp.

When I entered I could not refrain from an exclamation of delight, nor can I forbear to describe

the place in some detail. To begin with it was almost round and very large, the ceiling being domed and the books being carried in long narrow stacks sunk into the paneling between the French windows as high as the carved molding. Above this an exquisite tone of blue with a few cleverly distributed stars gave a sense of infinite space, and despite the cumbersome old Florentine furniture the room was neither heavy nor dull. There was just enough gold to furnish flashes of light, and the warm old amber brocade on the chairs seemed to catch and hold the sunlight which poured through the long narrow windows at the west, all of which opened directly upon the first terrace of the rose garden. But the real triumph in lighting was the rose window of plain leaded glass on the north side of the room—the wall of which had been reconstructed to accommodate it in order that the Madonna might be properly illuminated by day. We gasped our admiration of its perfect lacery, and then turned about and faced the picture itself in reverent silence.

[Pg 156]

Of course it is ridiculous to suppose there is anyone to whom the Madonna of the Lamp is not perfectly familiar, being, as she is, one of those paintings which are impressed upon the popular mind in spite of itself through endless repetition upon postal and Christmas cards, engravers' windows, magazine covers and Sunday-school prizes, to say nothing of Little Collections of Great Masters, gift photographs, furnishings for college rooms and appeals for public charities.

Nevertheless, I will describe it, because as my dear father used to say, the collective mind of the public is not the public mind of the collector. It has to be told, in other words, when it can't be shown; whereas, of course, you can tell a collector nothing—and get him to admit it.

Well, at any rate, in case you do not recall it, the Madonna of the Lamp is a round canvas, not more than two and a half feet in diameter, and represents the Virgin with the Child curled up in a robe of sapphire blue which falls from her head in thick sweeping folds and crosses her knee in such a way as to give the appearance of being blown from behind by a wind and aiding in the circular effect. She is seated and bending over the Infant, protecting both him and the flickering lamp from the wind. Above her head is a single star visible through a patch of leaded window.

[Pg 157]

Now you recall it, I am sure. It was painted in Florence by Raphael about the year 1506 and is one of the most famous monuments to his genius.

And Markheim had provided a most wonderful setting for this jewel. The great window was of a design made from that behind the Virgin's head, and the carved panel upon which the painting hung was a skillful variation of the beautiful old carved frame about the canvas—the original frame, it was believed to be, and the motif of the design was carried out in a molding which diminished into a faint bas-relief at the outer edges of the large wall space above the mantel where it hung. Nor was the picture hung too high. Even I could have touched the bottom of the carvings; and the mantelpiece had no other ornament except two gigantic polychrome candlesticks of the same period. Truly it was a wonderfully successful arrangement and reflected great credit on the owner who had conceived it.

"Do you like it?" was all he said, looking not at the Madonna but at Alicia. "Do you like it, eh?"

Mr. Pegg took the question to himself.

"And you paid five hundred thousand dollars for that little picture?" he asked incredulously. "Why, from the price I expected something as big as a barn door!"

[Pg 158]

"Pa—don't be a boob—it's a diamond without a flaw," said Peaches, going closer, her face alight with pleasure. "It's a real mother and child," she added. "How big would you want them to be? They are immortal—isn't that big enough?"

Through the crudity of her rebuke I got one of those rare glimpses of her golden heart.

Her crude parent, however, was unimpressed.

"Of course it's real pretty," he said. "Which is more than can be said for most antiques. But five hundred thousand! My Lord, look at the profit? There can't be over ten dollars' worth of paint in it! Where is this feller, Raphael?"

"Where the profit is doing him precious little good," chuckled Sebastian.

"Must be hell!" commented Pinto.

"Very possibly, in spite of his choice of subjects!" replied Markheim.

Whereat he and I exchanged our first glance of thoroughly sympathetic understanding. I, of course, at once lowered my eyes, a burning sense of shame at my implied disloyalty struggling with my desire to spare Mr. Pegg the mortification of instruction. I had not forgotten and shall never forget how gently he led me to see the error of my ways when I first hit the ranch—as, for example, when I unknowingly made culls of his best tree of home fruit and he urged me to make marmalade of them and never told me until afterward that the way I had picked them by pulling them off the tree instead of clipping the stem made it impossible to use them for anything else. So now in my own realm I wished to lead him gradually into the paths of erudition and allow him to learn by inference whenever possible.

[Pg 159]

Well, the rest of the house was beautiful as could be, and after we had finished inspecting it we had tea in a wonderful glass room filled with gay cretonnes and flowering plants, wicker chairs and caged canaries. Two menservants served the refectation. Mr. Sebastian Markheim had a considerable household, that was plain, and I began to regret that I had steadfastly stood with Peaches on refusing her father's suggestion of a personal maid.

"There's something too public about it," had been her objection, which I had sustained.

But here amid all these servitors I felt differently. Not that I felt any indignity attached to our maidless condition, being, as I was, a self-supporting female well able to afford one if I desired such a thing. I could now live as I chose instead of as I ought, if you understand me. But I knew that Peaches would have to get a female attendant after she was married. Markheim was not the man to allow his wife to live in comfort when he could provide her with luxury. And at this juncture of my thought I stopped halfway through the sugared tea biscuit, a terrible realization overwhelming me for the first time.

When Peaches was married she would no longer need me. Who then would need me? Nobody? Not Euphemia, who never answered my letters, though she always mutely cashed the inclosed checks. And would there be any checks to send her? Where would they come from? It was a chilling thought, as will readily be admitted. Why I had not thought of it sooner I cannot say. It must have been evident from the moment of Peaches' engagement that when the affair reached its consummation I would be, to put it vulgarly, out of a job.

[Pg 160]

Of course I did not so greatly care for myself, but there was Euphemia, the dependent, to consider, whose tradition of useless gentility must not be disturbed in her declining years. True, I had saved a very considerable portion of my salary and had almost twenty thousand dollars distributed among six savings banks. That might conceivably tide us over for the remainder of our lives. But I had acquired the habit of remunerative occupation and close companionship with dear friends; also a taste for French heels and facial massage whenever practical. And the thought of the Chestnut Street house was, the more shame upon me for saying it of my father's home, almost intolerable. And Mr. Pegg—dear Pinto, how I should miss him! in a purely friendly way of course.

Fully realizing for the first time the bitterness of my situation I refused a second sugared bun and rising remarked that as Sebastian expected dinner guests we had best retire and obtain a little rest before it was time to dress.

Of course my intention was in part to leave the lovers together for a properly brief interval, but somewhat to my surprise Peaches rose also and said she would accompany me. My heart was heavy, and for once I would have preferred to be alone. But she slipped her arm about my neck, and we started for our rooms, chatting amiably while the men settled down for a cigar.

Now one of the peculiarities of the Markheim palace was that it gave no appearance of modernity. Though it was in point of fact less than ten years built, it was so cunningly designed, so convincingly arranged, with such perfection of detail that it possessed an air of old mystery difficult to define, and under ordinary circumstances most fascinating—a real achievement on the part of architect and decorator alike. The ancient furniture stood so easily in the background provided for it that one could have sworn the walls had been made before it; the modern lighting was so well handled as to be absolutely unobtrusive.

[Pg 161]

Slowly, affectionately, we crossed the main hall, pausing to look at the chased armor on the two silent figures at the foot of the beautiful winding stairs. A Gobelin tapestry fluttered faintly on the wall above us, stirred by the gentle sunset wind from the spring-scented river below, and the lingering twilight filled the great hall with mysterious shadows. There was not another soul in sight and not a sound to be heard except the distant murmur of the men's talk and the voice of a pleasure boat distantly upon the water. I accompanied Alicia up the stairs, feeling as if I were in some enchanted palace of medieval days, and above, the long dim corridor in which the lamps had not yet been lit was ghostly in the pale glimmer from its high mullioned windows.

"Isn't it spooky?" said Peaches in a low tone.

"Yes!" I replied, whispering involuntarily. "One might almost expect to see a ghost!"

And scarcely had I spoken the words when Peaches, the supernatural, who was a trifle ahead of me by now, uttered a shriek and leaned trembling against the stone wall of the passageway. But for a moment I could not come to her aid. My limbs seemed frozen, paralyzed. For there suddenly and soundlessly a form was towering vaguely before us, its white face luminous in a shaft of uncanny light.

[Pg 162]

It was the Duke di Monteventi!

XI

[Pg 163]

After one horrible endless moment the figure moved slightly and the corridor was flooded with the soft mellow light from half a dozen electric sconces.

With a half-choked cry of "Sandy!" upon her lips Peaches moved toward him, only to stop short, her face going completely blank. The man was a servant, a valet presumably, carrying a folded suit of clothing carefully over one arm and wearing soft felt shoes, which had been the secret of his noiseless approach. His hair was thickly gray and his face was lined and scarred. He looked perhaps ten years older than Sandro—and yet the likeness was there—unmistakable, though in the full light not by any means so perfect.

"I beg pardon, ladies," he said in a measured voice, withdrawing another step. "The lights should have been on."

Then with a little bow he passed noiselessly down the corridor and entered one of the bedrooms,

presumably that occupied by Markheim himself.

Peaches made a little involuntary gesture as if to follow him, stretching out her hands toward his unconscious back, and then, as the door closed upon him, turned to me, her amber eyes afire. She seized me by the wrist in a manner positively painful and dragged me into her room, where she caused me to sit down abruptly and without personal selection upon a sort of hassock, the while she towered over me, fairly glowing with animation—far, far, more like her old self than she had been for almost six years.

[Pg 164]

"Free!" she said. "Was it? Was it? Oh, Free—say something!"

"It couldn't have been!" I replied shakily. "And yet the resemblance—it was extraordinary!"

"It was a miracle!" said Peaches. "No two people could look so much alike."

"He had a brother," I began doubtfully, "who was merely supposed to be dead. Sandro would have known you at once."

"But didn't he?" she questioned, striding up and down the room with her long, clean gesture of body. "Why didn't he speak at once? He was too much amazed!"

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed. "How could he be amazed, when as a servant in this house—in all probability Sebastian's valet—he must have known in advance all about your coming here!"

"That's so," said Peaches. "And, of course there are differences—the grayness, the lines in his face. But something may have happened to him."

"Very likely!" I replied dryly. "Considering we have heard from Cousin Abby that he was killed in action."

"But it may have been a mistake," she whispered. "Stranger things have happened. And a servant! No—even if he had gone quite mad and forgotten everything that would hardly be possible."

"Servant or not, if it is he, why on earth shouldn't he recognize you?" I demanded. "That's the sort of encounter which is supposed to bring people to their senses, you know."

"But didn't he recognize me?" she replied with a doubt willfully sustained. "Just for an instant, I was so sure! Well!"

[Pg 165]

"What are we going to do about it?" I said. "If by chance it really is Sandro it's a nice situation, I'm sure! With your wedding only a few weeks off and, and—why, good gracious! It's simply terrible!"

But Peaches didn't look as if she thought it was simply terrible—not in the least. She was terrifically excited, but more beautiful than ever.

"Free!" she cried. "I know it is he! Do you suppose I could feel as I did—as I do, at the encounter unless it is Sandy? Lots of times people know things without evidence. And this is one of those times. I feel it is he. I don't care how differently he looked when the lights went up."

"But how on earth are you going to find out?" I urged. "Surely, Peaches, he cannot have forgotten you!"

"Forgotten!" she exclaimed, stopping short in her pacing of the floor. "Forgotten! Good heavens, Free, you don't suppose that is it, do you?"

"Of course I don't!" I snapped, even though I was not entirely sure but that a young man who was capable of taking French leave in the way that Sandro had six years previously, was not capable of anything, including having an *affaire de cœur* with Peaches and then failing to recollect the incident. Some men are that way; I have it on the authority of The Duchess.

"This man is older!" I went on. "And we don't know for certain what his position in the household is. The best thing for you to do is to question Sebastian about him."

"Won't he think it strange if I let him on to the fact that I'm stuck on his valet?" Peaches considered in her disconcertingly frank way.

[Pg 166]

"Good gracious, you must do nothing of the kind!" I interposed. "Besides, you don't know that you are, as you vulgarly put it, stuck on him. You only think it may be Sandy. Kindly keep that in mind, my dear!"

"I think there is something damn funny about the whole shooting match!" said Peaches vigorously. "And I'm going to the bottom of it mighty pronto!"

With which she flung from the room to don one of her majestic evening gowns, leaving me in great distress of mind for fear of what she would do next. To array myself for the evening's festivities and to descend to them in a becomingly dignified manner was no easy task, but by the greatest effort at self-control I accomplished both the arrangement of my toilet and the adjustment of my manner sufficiently to reappear in polite society in the state of composure due to my name and heritage and the responsible position which I occupied toward the Pegg family. It is one of the penalties of a great name that one must ever maintain the aspect of a painted ancestor, no matter what tumult may be going on within one. And though I admit that I was in a profoundly disturbed state of mind, and indeed I may say, shaken to the very depths of my romantic soul by what had occurred and still more by what might occur, I believe that my conduct and appearance as I stood smiling beside the unconscious Mr. Markheim, aiding him in the reception of his guests, would have been wholly approved by my dear father. And I rather relished the sense of standing upon a species of social volcano.

When Peaches appeared on the, as I may call it, haunted stairway, a gasp of delighted astonishment went up from the assemblage. She was arrayed in a sheathlike gown of golden sequins that rivaled but did not surpass the glory of her hair, and though she was without jewels except for her ring, she shone with a radiance such as can scarcely be imagined. Her wonderful hair lay close and glistening upon her head like a helmet of burnished metal, and this taken with her—er—martial though décolleté costume gave her somewhat the appearance of a young Pallas Athene with a redeeming touch of—er—jazz, if you know what I mean. At any rate she was magnificent. And if a trifle pale, it was from the intense wave of new life which had flooded her during the past few hours, and her eyes were like those of that terribly incoherent tiger of Blake's.

[Pg 167]

Well, I will not digress by describing the feast which Sebastian gave as a housewarming for his lady love. The field of such description has been widely covered by every chronicler from Balzac to W. D. Griffiths. Suffice to say that it was a very sumptuous affair, attended by a more or less cosmopolitan crowd, comprising friends and neighbors alike, and affording, I dare say, a reasonable amount of enjoyment to those present.

Under different circumstances I should have enjoyed it myself, being, as I am, possessed of a very profound sense of the solemnity of social functions and their proper conducting. But upon this occasion I was so taken up with being on the outlook for a glimpse of that mysterious valet among the other servants that I only succeeded in performing the mechanics of a pleasant evening. But nevertheless I was aware that the affair, considering that it was more or less impromptu due to our unexpected arrival, went off very well, and without my once seeing the person for whom I was automatically seeking.

[Pg 168]

Well, at about half after eleven that night, when the last guest had departed and we four—Mr. Pegg, Alicia, Sebastian and myself—were assembled in the library for a good-night discussion, Peaches laid her trap, if so I may call it, for the information she desired. She became suddenly domestic and affectionate over a glass of milk and vichy and I watched keenly as she led up to her subject with a deceitful air of innocence of which I would not have believed her capable. Markheim was in the seventh heaven at her interest, and dear Mr. Pegg stood under the Madonna chewing on a big cigar and nodding his approval.

"It was a wonderful dinner, Sebastian!" said Peaches, her big eyes limpid pools of approval. "What a peach of a chef you have!"

"I am glad you approve!" said the banker. "We will keep him on."

"There are an awful bunch of servants here," Peaches commented. "It will seem funny, keeping house with them after one Chinaman, and sometimes none, out on the ranch. I suppose I'll have a maid. But if I do I'm going to teach her pinochle! Have you a valet, Mark?"

"In a way," replied Markheim. "In a way I have—and then again I haven't!"

At this astonishing announcement you may well believe that a painful sensation occurred in my breast. I positively started out of my seat, though controlling myself instanter, and even Peaches gave a funny little gasp, which she, however, contrived to turn into a species of inane giggle, spluttering over her milk.

"What—what do you mean by that?" she said.

"Only that he's given notice," Markheim replied. "Nothing unusual about that nowadays, I assure you, my dear. And I'm sorry he's going," he added. "The best chap I've had—came to me six months ago, and been absolute perfection ever since!"

[Pg 169]

"Why do you let him go?" asked Peaches, her eyes fixed upon her fiancé as if she would like to hypnotize him into telling her more than she asked. "Why not give him more wages or something?"

"It's not a question of money," Sebastian explained. "It seems he dislikes women—regular misanthrope. It's all your fault, my dear. He gave notice as soon as I told him I was going to get married!"

"Oh!" said Peaches. "Then it was some time ago that he—he quit? Not just to-day?"

"About a month ago," replied her lover. "He expected to leave before you appeared upon the scene, only you are ahead of time. Great Scott, Alicia, you seem fearfully interested in the fellow? Have you seen him, or what is the idea anyhow?"

"No," lied Peaches calmly. "I just got to thinking about servants in general and about the personal-servant idea in particular. I don't know that the plan has my O. K. It's an embarrassing idea—makes me feel like a boob to have anybody dress me, unless to hook a fool dress up the back perhaps. And a Chinaman could do that, you know. What do you call the bird—by his front or hind name?"

"I call him Wilkes," said Markheim, laughing. "And you are too amusing, my dear. You are not obliged to have a maid, you know. It's quite conceivable that I can learn to hook a gown!"

"Or unhook it!" laughed Mr. Pegg.

This was too much for me. I bade them all good night and departed in high dudgeon.

[Pg 170]

The enormous main hall was but dimly lighted and I crossed it, not without hesitancy, and when at the foot of the staircase a hand was laid upon my arm I nearly screamed aloud. In fact I attempted to scream but was so frightened that I only accomplished a squeak. However, it was

no supernatural apparition, but Peaches, who had overtaken me, and who dragged me to my room, where she slammed the door behind us in breathless triumph.

"There!" she cried. "Did you hear him?"

"I did!" I replied. "And I think your father ought to be ashamed of himself, at his age, too!"

"Oh, forget dad!" she cried impatiently. "I know he's a roughneck, but that's not a weakness. I mean about Sandy?"

"Oh!" said I. "Well, what about him—if it is he?"

"If it is?" said Peaches. "Have you any doubts now? Leaving as soon as he heard about me, and then being caught by my unexpected arrival. Didn't you listen?"

"It may be just a coincidence," I demurred, though in truth I was deeply interested. "And he's been here six months. He must have heard of your engagement before—or at least been aware that Sebastian knew you."

"Perhaps," admitted Alicia, pacing up and down like a substantial sunbeam. "But that doesn't satisfy me. There's only one way to settle the question. I've got to have a private talk with that man."

"But how?" I gasped.

"You've got to arrange it," replied Peaches firmly.

"Impossible!" I squeaked. "What an idea! Though, of course, you could meet him secretly in the garden!" [Pg 171]

"The very thing!" exclaimed my charge with enthusiasm. "Here—I will write a note and date him up, and you will see that it gets to him. I'll meet him in the rose garden at midnight to-morrow."

She sat herself down at the exquisite old Moorish escritoire and taking pen and paper wrote in her labored, painstaking fashion, her head on one side, her tongue firmly between her teeth, the hair curling at the nape of her neck like that of an innocent child rather than a desperate maiden in a most thrilling situation.

"There!" she said at length, slipping the missive into an envelope and handing it to me. "There you are, Free. Now be sure he gets it, and let me know how he acts. It doesn't need any answer!"

With which she actually had the impudence to kiss me gayly on the cheek and run away to bed, leaving me standing as if paralyzed, the note in one hand, and the problem of handling the preposterous situation staring me in the face.

My dear father used to say that only those who must be ashamed need be afraid, and as this matter of the note was really none of my personal affair I need not, I suppose, have feared for the consequences; and yet I confess that I was filled with fear. The day had been interminable, and now it seemed that it was not yet over, though the clock pointed to a quarter after twelve. At such a circumstantial hour I had no mind to venture out into a corridor in which I had recently encountered a very fair imitation of a ghost. Indeed, there had been from the start of our acquaintance something very mysterious about the Duke di Monteventi, and death, it seemed, did not offer any solution, but rather extended the obscurity which surrounded him. [Pg 172]

It was my personal opinion that he was dead, and that this valet creature who had startled us in such a fashion merely bore an accidental resemblance to Sandro. Yet then again it was so much more romantic to consider his being resurrected as a possibility. But if it were Sandro, why on earth should he, who had the entrée to every fashionable house in Europe, reappear in the capacity of a servant?

Perchance it was not Sandro, but his supposedly murdered elder brother. That would, of course, account for the resemblance. This idea struck me as being remarkably intelligent, and I at once began to search my mind for its literary beginnings. My dear father used to say that all ideas had literary beginnings and all beginnings contained a literary idea. But neither Deadwood Dick, Edwin Arnold, Walter Pater or The Duchess seemed to have supplied me with the thought, strive as I would to place it among them. I was forced to claim it as original, and perhaps merely the theme for a story's beginning. And despite my dear father's precept, I do verily believe that I am at times productive of ideas quite my own, as, for example, in the realm of love, wherein my manifold ideas must have no other origin than my own brain, inasmuch as the only books on the subject which we possessed at home were written by a Frenchman named Balzac, and though ostensibly in English translation they were mostly set forth in asterisks, dots and dashes.

But I digress. Let us return to the privacy of my chamber at the villa, and the note to Wilkes, which somehow must be disposed of.

My first inclination was to procure a two-cent stamp and mail it—an obvious solution. And yet I hesitated, because if by chance it should miscarry and fall into the wrong hands, what dreadful consequences might not ensue? What a, as one might say, roughhouse might it not—er—precipitate! No, mailing would not do, because at best I might be unable to find a mail box or post office before late the next day, and I would certainly be unwilling to offer a note so addressed to one of the other household servants. [Pg 173]

Furthermore, I was hampered by a lack of familiarity with the house. Doubtless there was a servants' mail box somewhere about the service stairs, if only I knew where. But to wander round looking for it would be both nerve-racking and indiscreet, particularly at such an hour. Finally in desperation I was half tempted to burn the wretched thing, and forbore only because of my

promise to Alicia. My brain felt as if it were on fire. I did not know what to do.

All at once the great room with its wide spaciousness and light hangings seemed suffocatingly hot. I crossed to the window, and first extinguishing the light in order not to attract the night insects, opened it and sat down beside it, the better to meditate upon my course of action. I was half determined to take the whole matter to Pinto Pegg in the morning and allow him to settle our minds for us, even against Alicia's will.

But as I reclined upon the window-sill the vision of my own somewhat barren girlhood rose before me like a reproachful ghost, and I had no heart to stifle the sequel to that romance which I had seen bud, unfold and blossom in the tropic air at San Remo. Holding the letter in my lap it seemed to burn through the heavy silk of my gown, such was the fire which had inspired its writing. No matter what might come—what disillusionment, what disappointment—it should be delivered. I vowed that through no fault of mine should Peaches be cheated of her love; and I felt myself to be an excellent judge of love. I had looked on at a good deal of it. Indeed as I sat there it occurred to me that I had accomplished a great lot of looking on in the course of my life. And scarcely had this commentary crossed my mind when, quite in line with my usual fortune, I found myself once more an observer, though unobserved.

[Pg 174]

I have remarked that Mr. Markheim's villa was built upon several levels, thus permitting the windows on one wing to overlook those on a different story in another portion of the building, and that there were several wings or sections to the place, so arranged that the main portions were well isolated from each other in accordance with the modern ideas of comfort and quiet. Thus the living rooms were in the main body of the house, the library was at the extreme end, the bedrooms in one wing, and the kitchen with the servants' quarters over them in another wing at the extreme opposite end of the house but facing the guest rooms across a wide garden space. For the most part the service quarters opened upon a hidden court of their own but the wide row of windows must be, I decided, the rooms of the upper servants.

Once possessed of this thought I began to visualize the interior plan of the house, particularly that of the corridor which would lead to those rooms. By a little figuring I came to the realization that they were in reality on the same level as my own chamber, though actually on the story above—that is to say, the third story while I was on the second. To reach them from within the house meant the ascent of one flight of stairs, whereas if one were to get out onto the little balcony below me and cross the roof of the porte-cochère, one would bring up on a ledge running level with the third story of the opposite wing; a by no means perilous journey unless one were to be observed from the garden below, which was not likely at night, modesty being the only thing subjected to any serious danger.

[Pg 175]

While I was meditating upon this architectural curiosity a light appeared in one of those third-story windows, and against it stood the figure of a man. It was Wilkes—or Sandro, as Peaches insisted upon calling him. I could see him very plainly, as indeed the whole of the rather small simple room was perfectly visible and he stood directly under the electric light. At this distance his resemblance to the lost duke was certainly remarkable. He was alone in the room, which was evidently his bedroom, and had plainly just finished with Markheim, for he carried the light gray suit which Sebastian had worn that afternoon, and several pairs of boots.

Fired by a thought which offered to solve my problem I counted the windows between me and that before which he stood. There were fifteen; his was the sixteenth along the ledge. To walk the distance along the balcony, over the intervening roof of the porte-cochère was no task at all to one who had been living a life in the open for six years, and there was very little danger of my being observed since none of the windows which I should be obliged to pass were those of bedrooms—except in the servants' wing. I would wait until the light was extinguished and then play my part.

The interval between my resolution and the moment for its execution was but brief. In a surprisingly short time the light in the man's room was extinguished, and then I had only to wait until I might reasonably suppose him to be asleep—a half hour, for surely, I thought, a tired servant would take no longer. At the termination of this period I removed my shoes and put on a pair of knitted bedroom slippers with felt soles—a welcome Christmas offering from Galadia and Boston—and gathering my dress about me with little regard for the dictates of modesty, I stepped forth from my window and began my circumlocution.

[Pg 176]

I am aware that this performance of mine would not have been looked upon with favor by Euphemia, nor yet by the members of our home-mission sewing circle, yet my conscience was clear, and I had ever been somewhat at a loss to confine my behavior strictly within the limits of the society in which I had been reared. And furthermore, there was but little chance that the sewing circle or indeed my sister would ever learn of the incident, and as my dear father used to say, there are more Lorelei in the social sea than ever come out of it. I infer that he intended some reference to social shipwrecks.

And had my circle of acquaintances ever become aware of my behavior upon this particular occasion without clearly understanding the motive which actuated me they would undoubtedly have wrecked my standing. In point of fact they might even have done so with the fullest understanding of my motive—the act being itself father to the ostracism, if you know what I mean, and motives are seldom if ever considered when the opportunity for passing judgment occurs.

But at the moment of emerging upon the narrow ornamental balcony I was concerned with none of these possibilities, which occurred to me only at a later date. I was too thoroughly occupied

[Pg 177]

with making a noiseless, inconspicuous progress, and with wondering whether the valet was high class enough to sleep with his window open. I trusted that he did so, and expected it, for he was a clean, bronzed sort of man, and in truth it would prove utter frustration for me if he should be in the habit of sleeping with it closed.

It was with something of the emotion which I fancy that a participant in a motion-picture drama must experience that I, not without some difficulty in climbing the intervening railings, approached my goal, silently as the—er—wings of night, as one might say, feeling my way along the wall and taking careful count of the windows as I went, the garden a still pool of blackness below me, in which the few scattered stars of the overcast sky found no reflection. It was really very dark for such an enterprise, and though the fact was undoubtedly of advantage in one way it made my progress uncomfortably slow, the more so as I had now no lighted window to guide me, and was compelled to advance by the sense of touch alone.

I passed the roof of the porte-cochère with success, climbed on to the ledge leading outside of the servants' wing, the letter safe within my bosom. There I began again my feeling of the window sills, this time with the added wish for clinging to them for support as well as their enumeration, for this was the most perilous portion of my undertaking, there being only a gutter along the ledge, and no railing of any sort. And after an interminable period I reached my goal—the sixteenth window. It was open!

With infinite caution I slid past the shutter, holding my breath lest I be heard; and flattening myself against the wall I extracted the letter from its hiding place and peered round the side of the aperture, doubtful how best to dispose of it soundlessly.

[Pg 178]

The casement was not only open but open to its widest capacity. And while I was rapidly considering whether I should simply lay the letter on the sill, trusting that the wind would not blow it away, or if I should drop it inside, risking some sound that might waken the sleeper, the moon slid from under a cloud, and on the instant the whole interior became visible to me.

It was empty!

The bed had not even been disturbed, and the door was closed. As well as I could see in the dim light the only clothing lying about was that which the man had brought from his master's room, and this was neatly placed upon a chair, even as I had observed him to dispose of it nearly an hour since. It was a most perplexing matter. But without waiting to consider it further I reached within and laid the letter upon a chair beside the window where the occupant could not fail to observe it upon his return, and forthwith withdrew the upper portion of my body. As I did so I heard a sound which, in the language of my favorite authors, froze my blood. Someone was walking upon the gravel of the path directly beneath me.

I stood as if petrified, listening intently. For a moment, nothing, and my heart relaxed a little, as the supposition occurred to me that it might have been some animal bent upon nocturnal adventures. But hardly had this reassurance registered in my brain when it came again. Without doubt someone was making a stealthy progress along that side of the house upon which I stood in an unusual, not to say compromising, position. And in another moment my fears were justified, for out of the abyss below me darted a dark and noiseless figure, followed at close range by a second one. Both crossed the moon patch like wraiths, vanishing instantly into the shadows of the shrubbery beyond. Two men! What were they about? No good, that was certain. And what, in merciful heaven's name, was I to do about it?

[Pg 179]

To give the alarm from my present position was impossible. Moreover, if I were to remain where I was the two in the shrubbery might at any instant discover my presence upon the ledge, for the moon in illuminating the room behind me was, of course, also rendering me clearly visible. To retreat to my own quarters by the route by which I had come was now obviously impossible. There remained but one course, and I took it. Without further ado I picked up my skirts and climbed into the bedchamber of my host's bodyservant.

XII

[Pg 180]

Once inside the room I sank upon a chair for an instant, gasping for breath and quite all of a tremble. But after a little I regained some control of my faculties, which I now directed toward effecting my escape.

From the adjoining room came the noises of a heavy sleeper—snores and wheezy breathing. The head butler, without doubt; a great hulk of a man whom it would be no easy task to rouse even if I were in a position to rouse any one, which, of course, I was not—now less than ever. Aside from his strenuous slumbers the wing was silent, yet somehow portentously so, as only a house of sleepers can be. Beyond my refuge a night light was burning in the hall. I could discern this from the crack beneath the door. Obviously I had no choice but to leave in that direction, even though it was highly probable that I should encounter Wilkes in the corridor. Still, such misadventure must be chanced. With madly beating heart I crossed the room and stealthily tried the handle. Imagine my amazement when I found that the door was locked—from the inside! The man must be in the room with me!

This thought so filled me with terror that throwing caution to the winds I unlocked and opened the door, fleeing down the dimly lighted corridor like a bat out of Hades, as Peaches would put it,

and plunging down the first staircase that appeared.

The hall below was completely dark, and I must have taken a wrong turning, because in what seemed about two minutes I was completely lost. For once my nerves gave way completely. I wanted to shriek but could only make a little clicking sound which nobody seemed to hear. Then I began to run, because I thought something was after me—I did not know what. I couldn't see anything, and yet I felt overpowered by terror. It flashed across my brain that perhaps Sandro—or rather, Wilkes—did not need to unlock his door in order to leave his room; perhaps he came through the closed door and only kept it locked to prevent people from discovering that he didn't really exist.

[Pg 181]

The thought gave new impetus to my speed, and for time uncounted I flew about that horribly vast and silent mansion as noisily and irrationally as if I were myself some poor lost spirit. I seemed wholly unable to find my way back to my own apartment or to locate any familiar door at which I might venture to knock and beg for help. And the realization that those two night prowlers in the garden might at any moment break into whatever part of the house I was in at the instant did nothing to induce a greater serenity of mind.

Moreover, I could not seem to find a flight of stairs leading upward, and when at length I emerged from the service wing it was to find myself in the ghostly main hall once more. And there it was that a sudden unexpected encounter with reality shocked me back to some degree of common sense.

From this main hall, which was two stories in height a corridor led directly to the library at the extreme left end of the main building.

Other rooms opened from the corridor, of course, but the door directly at the end was that of the Madonna room, as I called it, and as I, emerging from the servants' entrance, advanced toward the foot of the main stair I stood as if rooted to the ground, for from that far doorway gleamed a faint light.

[Pg 182]

Now though it is true that anything pertaining to the supernatural, mesmeric or ghostly is capable of upsetting my equanimity to a very considerable degree, in the realm of obviously human activity I have never been a coward or a laggard. Never shall it be said that the last Freedom Talbot, the tenth to bear that illustrious name, ever disgraced it by cowardice, though but a mere woman. Not for nothing did I bear the title of those men who had given their lives and made their fortunes in the cause for which they were baptized.

"In time of danger an ounce of action is worth a pound of theory," my dear father used to say; and his precepts are in my blood no less than in my mind. And upon this occasion I was not backward.

There was no time now to give the alarm; it was, as the saying goes, up to me. Waiting only long enough to put my right foot back into its knitted slipper, the heel of which had come off during my flight, I immediately stalked to one of the suits of armor which guarded the staircase, and removed the great sword which lay within its hollow grasp. Thus armed I began a stealthy progress toward the library door.

The sword was heavy and difficult to carry but I was in no mood to be put off by a trifle of that kind. Whatever those two villains were up to in that library I was determined to put an end to immediately. I had no fear that a common thief would dare to shoot at my gray head, and the now perfect respectability of my situation gave me confidence. Nevertheless I took care to make no unnecessary noise. Grasping my weapon in such a manner as to be ready for any emergency I sidled along the wall of the corridor, concealing myself behind the portière which hung at the door, and cautiously peeked within.

[Pg 183]

On the mantelpiece a little electric lantern was burning, and before it stood Wilkes the valet, his forearms resting upon the shelf, his chin upon his hands, and his face upturned to the Madonna as if in worship. Never have I seen a face more, as it were, glorified than was his at that moment. His very soul, if I may be so indelicate as to mention such a thing, seemed to be in his eyes, and an inner light illuminated his countenance, almost obliterating the lines and making him appear far younger than I had at first thought. The scar on his temple blazed like a white star as the lamplight struck it, giving him an uncanny aspect that was yet beautiful, and I could not but note the easy grace with which he maintained his posture. But most remarkable of all was the hunger with which he feasted his eyes upon that painting.

In the feeble illumination the Madonna herself was smiling back at him, and seemed almost to waver and lean gently toward him. It was a strangely intimate scene—almost I felt as if I had intruded upon an interview between lovers. And yet that was all nonsense, as I presently realized. Immensely relieved that the intruder was, after all, no intruder but one of the household servants, I quietly hid the sword behind the folds of the portière, leaning it against the inner wall as unobtrusively as possible. But the man before the picture would not, I think, have noticed had I dropped the clumsy thing, so absorbed was he. And then, when I had disposed of my armament, I entered the apartment and came within three feet of him before I spoke.

[Pg 184]

"Wilkes," I said quietly, "what are you doing here?"

The man jumped as though he had been shot, and spun round to face me. All self-control was momentarily gone from him, and that was a terrible thing to see. His jaw had dropped and the lips quivered pitifully, his whole face shook convulsively and his shoulders heaved. Then by a supreme effort he regained his self-mastery. His figure grew quiet, the shoulders drooped in the manner which seemed habitual to them, and the lines of his face hardened, adding the years which his enraptured pre-occupation had temporarily stripped from him. Once more he was the

unobtrusive body servant.

"I beg pardon, Miss Talbot," he said. "I was startled."

"So was I," I commented dryly. "I thought you were—well, never mind. What are you doing down here?"

"I fancied I heard some one, miss," the man replied. "Prowlers, or cracksmen, perhaps; and thought I'd better just take a look round."

"H'm!" said I, unconvinced. "So you heard them, too, eh?"

A curious look passed over his face. I could have vowed the emotion was fright—that he had not the remotest idea I would have said such a thing.

"Did you hear anything, miss?" he asked.

"I certainly did."

"Perhaps it was myself you heard then, miss!"

"I don't know!" I replied, looking at him sharply. "Perhaps it was. At any rate I know positively that I saw two men stealing in the direction of these windows not over twenty minutes ago. But there is only one man here now, it seems." [Pg 185]

"You saw two men!" he snapped, his voice keen with concern. Then he dropped it to his usual modulation. "Are you quite sure there was some one in the garden?"

"As sure as that I am standing here!" I retorted. "I saw them perfectly—at least plainly enough to be sure they were men; and up to no good, I am equally certain of that!" Surely there was nothing mysterious about this man—he was all too plainly just a stupid servant. I could have shaken him from sheer irritation, and began bitterly to regret having left that note in his chamber.

"Well?" I said impatiently. "Aren't you going to do something about it?"

"Ah—er—yes, certainly, miss," said he, "I'll have a look round of course. Did you say they came this way?"

"Headed for these very windows!" I said firmly.

He crossed to the long French casements and tried the fastenings, which were long bars that crossed them at two levels, making entrance impossible without breaking the leaded glass. They were undisturbed. The great rose window was, of course, impenetrable, both by construction and because of its height from the ground.

"It is all quite secure, miss," said he. "And the beggars will be frightened off by now, I think, for they will have seen the light."

"Look here, Wilkes, my man!" I said sharply. "If you were down here on a burglar hunt, why were you looking for them in the frame of the Madonna of the Lamp?" [Pg 186]

He must have been prepared for that, for he replied composedly enough, with downcast eyes.

"I inadvertently stopped to have a look at it, miss," said he. "I have a liking for fine pictures, miss."

"Well, I suppose that's all right enough," I said, still somehow very much troubled in my mind, I scarcely knew why. "A love of art is probably one of the requisites in newfangled help, but dear knows Galadia never showed any! Well, be that as it may, we'd better make the round of the house and be sure that everything is safe!"

"Very well, miss!" said he. "But need you come, miss? I'll just find the watchman—he's usually in the back hall."

"Well, I'll go that far with you," I compromised. "I want to make sure that he thinks everything is all right before I go to bed."

"Very well, miss," said Wilkes again. But I could not help feeling he was uncommonly anxious to get rid of me.

Switching the lights on ahead of us as we went, and revealing the cheerful normal aspect of the house as it really was, composed my nerves to a considerable extent; and finding the watchman at his post in the back hall was also reassuring. One thing struck me as curious, however. The man, a Latin of some sort, was not dozing in the expected manner of night watchmen, curled upon a comfortable chair or nodding over an extinct pipe. He was standing in the middle of the floor, knocking one boot against the other, and though the door, leading presumably to the kitchen garden, was shut I at once got a strong impression of his having been out of doors a moment before. There was that waft of fresh air that comes in with a person from the coolness of the night clinging to his clothing, and the room itself was fresh instead of close as might have been anticipated. This in itself was, of course, in no way extraordinary, and might indeed have passed unnoticed had it not been for what he said. [Pg 187]

"Everything all right, Pedro?" asked Wilkes, who had entered ahead of me.

"Yas—was' ell matt'?" replied the fellow, evidently surprised by having visitors at such an hour. "You tink you hear sometin'?"

"Yes—Miss Talbot saw two men in the garden—and I also thought I heard something out of the ordinary—someone breaking in—like at a lower window."

"No—no!" said Pedro. "Everytin' all ri'. Me just maka da round."

"Then you must have seen those men," I said quietly. He gave me a stare and laughed, white teeth gleaming.

"No, no!" he said again. "No two—me—you see one men—das me—you see me, signora!"

His confidence was perfect, and argument failed to move him. Finally I gave it up and went to bed, thinking it unnecessary to rouse the other members of the household, for after all were not two of the menservants awake and in charge? And what could I prove? Nothing except that I was a nervous, imaginative old woman. It was not until I had actually got into bed that I recalled one fact which was sufficient in itself to justify the most alarming conclusions.

Wilkes' door had been locked on the inside, and yet I had found him inside the house, while his window had been opened wide. The thought caused me to sit bolt upright in bed. And once this wide awake again, I realized further that the obvious conclusion that Wilkes had left by way of his open window was absurd. How could he possibly have left the third story of the house in such a fashion? I was positive that no rope ladder or such contraption had been attached to the sill. If there had been it would scarcely have escaped my notice. And even if he had got down in some way how could he have got back?

[Pg 188]

Yet there had been two men in the garden. I had positively seen them with my own eyes, and no Italian watchman could persuade me in broken English to the contrary. Also there had been two men downstairs and awake in the house—Wilkes and Pedro. Still further, Pedro was an Italian and had just been out of doors. Were the two whom I had seen in the garden these two? If so, what had been their object in meeting outside, when both had the run of the house and were already in it?

On the other hand, Pedro had been obviously surprised at seeing us. Or had it been merely my presence which had occasioned the surprise?

By this time my head was simply stupid from thinking, and when I at length composed myself to sleep I had formed but one line of action—to do nothing and say nothing until somebody else did. I would hold my tongue in the morning and see what sort of report of the night's activities the two men made before I said a word. And upon this resolve I at length fell asleep.

My dear father used to say that often the best way to prove the guilt of a suspected party is to give him the opportunity of denying something of which you have not yet accused him. And with this axiom in mind next morning when I descended to breakfast, I held high hopes of having a practical demonstration of its truth. Buoyed up more by my lively interest in the situation than by the brief slumber in which I had indulged, I dressed in a printed gingham as a refreshing, light and springlike costume calculated to improve my appearance, which showed some ravages from the night before, and with mind and marcel all composed and in good order, I presented as calm and cheerful an appearance to the company which slowly gathered in the charming breakfast room as if nothing at all out of the usual had occurred during the night.

[Pg 189]

Peaches was at the table, looking lovelier than ever in sports clothes—a form of unsexed semifemale attire most distasteful to me ordinarily, and as I took my seat beside her she managed a brief whisper.

"When are you going to?" she breathed cryptically.

"I already have!" I whispered back, and then could say no more because Mr. Pegg emerged from the produce sheet of the newspaper behind which he had been growling, and attacked the orange upon the plate before him.

"Florida! Bah!" he commented, scattering the seeds wildly. "Mornin', Miss Free. Can't raise anything down there but the kind of stuff we refuse to market! Ugh! Surprised at Markheim's Chinaboy. Well, Miss Free, you look like you'd just eaten the canary. What's up?"

"Why, Mr. Pegg!" I protested. "How you talk!"

And then mercifully, before he had any opportunity of enlarging further upon the subject, Sebastian Markheim came into the room, his face red and moist with excitement. He seemed fairly about to burst out of his light gray tweed clothing, and his walk, usually a waddle, now assumed the proportion of a trot.

[Pg 190]

"Good morning, good morning!" he said, taking his seat. "Dear me, what on earth do you suppose? Attempted robbery here last night, 'pon my word! But the beggars don't seem to have got away with anything except—?"

Here he paused, unaccountable.

"Except what?" I asked sharply.

"Most curious thing!" he gasped. "Very extraordinary, very extraordinary! A Damascus sword!"

"Holy mackerel!" said Mr. Pegg impatiently. "Damn it! Orange juice in my eye—stings like the devil. California orange juice never stings you like that! What did you say, Mark?"

"I said that the only thing the burglars took was one of the swords from the suits of armor!" yelled the banker. "What did they want it for, what did they want it for, that's what I'd like to know, eh?"

"Who told you such a nonsensical thing?" I asked.

"My man Wilkes," replied Mr. Markheim. "It seems the watchman, Pedro, has disappeared as

well, but it's hardly likely the robbers took him."

"More likely he was one of them!" said I. "And as for the missing sword—it's too bad your servants don't dust more carefully. Sebastian Markheim, that's all I've got to say about that!"

"What do you mean, Free?" Alicia put in. "Do you know anything about the burglars?"

"Only that I heard 'em and came downstairs," I said. "What else did your man Wilkes tell you?"

"Why, it seems he heard a noise," replied Markheim, "and came out of his room to listen. Then the sounds ceased, but he thought best to make the rounds. He had got as far as the library when he encountered you, Miss Talbot. Then he saw the watchman and you left him and went back upstairs—right, eh?"

[Pg 191]

"Yes, that's right," I admitted.

"The watchman denied having heard or seen anything out of the way," Sebastian went on, "and they went over the whole place together, to make sure everything was all right. But the funny part of it is that Pedro—that's the watchman chap—Pedro can't be found."

"Well, he's done nothing to send a posse after him for, far as I can see," observed Mr. Pegg. "And if you do send one he's likely to slew at it with that sword—better lay off him."

"I took that sword myself," I announced with dignity. "It is behind the portière to the library, where I left it. I am sorry to have been so untidy, but in the excitement of the moment I confess I neglected to put it back in place."

There was a general laugh at this, though I must say I failed to see any humor in a maiden lady having armed herself before facing a supposed burglar.

"You didn't take the watchman, too, did you?" asked Mr. Pegg.

"Of course not!" said I. "But I think he was a very evil, suspicious-looking character, with a decided accent and quite unwashed. I would never have engaged him as a watchman myself. He seemed to me obviously a bandit."

"Not at all, not at all!" exclaimed Sebastian. "Came to me with the very highest credentials—recommended strongly by the Italian consul himself."

"When did he come to you, Mark?" asked Peaches.

[Pg 192]

"Let's see," said he. "About three weeks ago."

"Then you don't know if he is a good burglar hound or not," said she. "But he may turn up, you know. Don't judge him too soon."

"I shan't," replied Markheim. "Devil his due, innocent until guilty and all that. But it's odd they can't find him. Generally sleeps in the gardener's cottage. Room's down there."

The subject being then to all appearances exhausted it was dropped, and in as short a time as would decently avoid suspicion Peaches finished her meal and strolled out of the room on to the terrace. Ostentatiously avoiding all appearance of haste I joined her a few minutes later and slipping my arm about her waist strolled out of earshot. The morning was exceedingly mild and fair, and choosing a secluded nook where the sun beat down warmly we seated ourselves upon a stone bench.

"Free!" Peaches demanded. "What happened? Shoot me the whole story, and be quick or they'll be getting too damn sociable before you're through." She nodded back toward the breakfast room.

Well, I told her as briefly as was consistent with accuracy. And when I had finished she simply sat and stared at me for a moment, quite wordless, though her mouth was open.

"Freedom Talbot!" she gasped at length. "I am horrified. The only safe place for you is the ranch. The moment I take you out into the civilized world it becomes necessary for me to sit up nights chaperoning you."

"Never mind chaperoning me!" I retorted. "My character is perfectly sound, no matter how my actions may at times appear. The main problem before us is to extricate you from the position you have got yourself into through making an appointment to meet this man who I am now absolutely convinced is simply a common servant."

[Pg 193]

"Who you have got me dated up to meet," corrected Peaches. "And believe me, kid, I'm going to meet him. There's more to this than you think, my worthy nurse!"

"But, Peaches!" I wailed. "When did you tell him to meet you, and where? Oh, why did I ever suggest such a thing?"

"How did you ever do such a stunt as walk that gutter? That's what gets me, old thing!" she retorted. "Free, you—you little gutter snipe! And as for my date, it's for one o'clock at the fountain."

"One o'clock!" I said. "Why, everybody will see you."

"Then they'll have some eyes!" said she. "I mean one o'clock to-night. And you are to come along with me, dear confidential companion, and listen in on the whole thing."

"Well, if you are determined to do it, of course, it is my duty to accompany you," I replied. "But I am beginning to be more and more convinced that you have simply let yourself in for a situation which is going to have dreadfully embarrassing consequences. If I had talked with that man

before I delivered your note I would never, never have consented. You are merely making a fool of yourself."

"Suppose I am mistaken?" said she with a sudden fierceness, the irises of her golden eyes contracting as if she were a female tiger cat. "Suppose I am? Isn't it worth risking? Heavens, how I have suffered these six years! You don't know! You can't know! And now perhaps—a miracle! I feel, I know without proof, that this man is my man. I could no more stay away than I could stop breathing. And if you refuse to go with me I swear I will go alone—yes, if I go by the same route you took last night!"

[Pg 194]

"Alicia!" I exclaimed, shocked at this strange and unladylike upheaval. "Of course I will go with you and make it as little improper as the circumstances permit. If nothing develops—er—nothing need be said, if you understand what I mean."

"I get you!" said Peaches with sudden weariness.

And a few moments later the gentlemen joined us, preferring to take their after-breakfast tobacco in the open air; a habit which I trusted Peaches would encourage when she became mistress of the mansion, as most beneficial for her rugs and hangings.

At any rate while they chatted and smoked, my charge maintaining a most casual, undisturbed exterior, I bent my energies upon the problem of just how Wilkes had reached the ground the night before, scanning the service wing of the house with critical eye, though ostensibly engaged upon my crochet work, for I was completing a handsome set of table mats which I intended as a wedding gift to Peaches. But being skilled in the art of crochet I could do it automatically, a gift which now served me well. But study the wall as I might I could not discover how he had come down it, much less returned by the same route. He simply must have gone in at another window. But why? It was a puzzle.

Somehow—I scarcely know with what series of small incidents—the day was passed. To me, and no doubt to my charge, it was but a channel to the goal of our midnight tryst. As for me I kept, as it were, mentally upon tiptoe, hourly expecting that some word would come from Wilkes; that he would show some sign signifying that he knew of the impending meeting, or perhaps send a note, his opportunity for answering Alicia's missive being so infinitely greater than had been ours in conveying it to him. Indeed all he had to do was to choose a moment when she would be comparatively unobserved, and present his own note upon a silver salver. As a matter of fact I fully expected some such incident, but the day passed without any occurring.

[Pg 195]

Of course there was not much time offered for such a trick, inasmuch as we were out in the motor all morning, lunched at a hospitable neighbor's who entertained in Peaches' honor, while during the afternoon Peaches and Sebastian played golf together, remaining on the course until almost dinner time.

During the dressing hour that preceded that function, which was to be held at the house next door but was to terminate early by agreement because of Mr. Markheim having a most important appointment in the city at nine o'clock the following morning, I ran into Peaches' room to inquire if any developments had occurred unknown to me. She replied in the negative.

"Haven't even seen him all day," she replied. "Have you?"

"No," said I. "And I wish I never might again! I am terribly upset about the whole thing!"

"You don't look upset!" said Peaches, unexpectedly coming over and kissing me through the golden cloud of her loosened hair. "You look sweet in that gown. I'm glad you put it on again."

[Pg 196]

"Our hosts were not here last night, so I thought it would be all right!" I declared, smoothing it down. "And I thought it was good and dark to wear later," I added significantly.

"I've decided we will leave not later than eleven o'clock," Peaches announced, choosing a black dinner gown, doubtless with the same end in view as that with which my own costume had been selected. "I'll have a headache—and that will give 'em two hours to go to bed and settle down to sleep before the fatal hour. Here, hook me up, will you?"

"I understand that watchman has never shown up," I commented as I obliged her. "I hope to goodness he won't be round to-night!"

"It's a merciful providence that he chose this for a night off!" was her reply.

And then presently we descended to the world and a hollow pretense of careless gayety, including a game of bridge, at which I was rapidly becoming an adept under Mr. Pegg's kind tutelage, and must confess to a hearty enjoyment of. And if I did win a few dollars at it occasionally, I always turned the money right over to the home mission, so nobody could have accused me of gambling in any moral sense, the more so as Mr. Pegg always most gallantly insisted upon paying my losses. But I digress.

Promptly at eleven Peaches' headache developed according to schedule, and presently we four of the villa found ourselves walking the short distance which lay between the two houses, the night being uncommonly fine and the moon on the river a sight to see.

"Isn't it wonderful?" I breathed as I clung to Mr. Pegg's arm, the lovers, if so I may call them, walking ahead, much to Sebastian's ill-concealed disgust.

[Pg 197]

"Pretty nifty," replied Mr. Pegg reluctantly. "But you ought to see the moon in Calif—of course, that is, you must admit it's not a patch on California."

"Oh, I'm not so certain!" I replied. "The moon is the moon, you know, and I am addicted to it. It—"

er—renews my youth, as it were."

"You said it!" replied the dear man.

But unfortunately we reached our own door at this juncture, where Peaches and Mr. Markheim were waiting for us, and there was nothing left, under Peaches' firm direction of matters, but to say good night and separate at the foot of the stairs.

For what seemed hours Peaches and I waited in my room listening to the low rumble of the two men as they sat upon the terrace and indulged in a final smoke; and then, presumably, in another final smoke and another.

"Will they never go to bed?" Peaches asked more than once, keeping her voice down to a whisper, however, as we had extinguished the lights and opened the windows in both rooms in order to give the appearance of having retired. Across the court the servants' wing showed an occasional lighted window, including that of Wilkes, the valet. Of course he would not be free until Markheim dismissed him for the night. It seemed as if our vigil would never end. But at length we heard a crisp voice below articulate in the fact that the owner was going to bed, and three-quarters of an hour later the light in the valet's room snapped out. Our time had come.

Never in all my born days had I imagined that a well-built staircase could make so much noise when trod upon by two of the gentler sex as did that stair in the Markheim mansion as Peaches and I made our stealthy—or at least comparatively stealthy—descent of it. Nor could I have believed it possible that the floor of that majestic hall was so ill laid as to squeak; but it did. As for the French windows of the library, which we selected as our means of exit, they appeared, to our hypersensitive consciousness, to be one chorus of rattles and groans. Unbarring them was simple enough even in the dark, for we did not dare to use any lights save that from Peaches's pocket flash, and once outside we took good care to close them after us, first making sure that the latch was open.

[Pg 198]

The garden was glorious in the moonlight, even though the barrenness of early spring was still upon it. A wealth of hyacinths sent up a heavy sweetness in the still night air, and on the lawn toward the river crocuses were whiter than the moonlight itself. Keeping close to the wall Peaches led the way to the fountain—a lovely thing, brought, like most of Sebastian's treasures, from overseas, and nestling against the wall as perfectly set as in the place for which it had originally been intended. A group of cedars, tall and dark, stood in a martial row on either side of it, casting a black shadow which afforded us perfect shelter from any prying eyes, and the tinkle of the water from the pipes of the ancient little Pan against the ivy-covered wall fell into the basin below with a sound that was music. A perfect night, a perfect spot, a perfect ladylove, Alicia—her face a white blur against the darkness—detached, ethereal, utterly lovely. And what of the man? Was he going to prove the ghost of a dead romance, or common clay? I fairly ached to know, being for once so absorbed in her love that I forgot to feel old and out of place.

[Pg 199]

But advancing years will manifest themselves, and often in the most annoying manner and at times least convenient. And as time went by and no lover appeared upon the scene I grew very, very tired.

"What do you suppose is the matter?" I asked at length.

"Something has detained him," Peaches replied. "Have patience. He can't be long now!"

Another period of silence went by, punctuated only by the hoot of a night boat going up the river like some great golden water beetle, and the occasional rustle of the budding branches overhead as a cool breeze sprang up and sent little clouds flecking across the wide face of the moon. Then came the sound of a step upon the gravel.

"There he is!" whispered Alicia, seizing me by the arm. Her hand was hot and trembling.

But the sound was not repeated, and no one approached, though we waited with straining ears.

"It's past the time now," said Peaches at length.

"Oh, Peaches—let us return!" I besought her. "I don't believe he's coming. Besides, I'm getting so tired!"

"Nonsense! Of course he'll come!" she said. But now there was a note of defiant doubt in her voice. "Wait—you must wait. There's a bench somewhere."

Fumbling about presently she found it, and together we sat down and again waited in a silence that seemed as if it would never end. The wind was growing more brisk and the clouds were thickening, hurrying across the irregular roof of the house like frightened sheep over a wigwag fence, and herding together in a rapidly growing mass beyond. There was a storm brewing; I could feel it in my bones. At length, when more than an hour had passed I could bear it no longer.

[Pg 200]

"Do you intend to wait all night for that—that servant?" I at length demanded in a fierce undertone.

"I'm going to wait a hundred years!" replied she. "If he got that letter he will come, servant or no servant."

"Peaches, you're a silly goose, and you have no consideration for me," I said. "My feelings are deeply wounded, and I'm quite worn out, what with two such nights in succession!" And with that I felt in my pocket for my handkerchief preparatory to beginning to cry. As I did so my fingers seized upon quite another object, which I drew forth with a sickening sense of what I had done—or rather of what I had most miserably failed to do, for the object which I drew forth was nothing

less than the letter which Peaches had intrusted to me the evening before!

"Peaches!" I gasped painfully, confession coming hard. "Peaches, I climbed out of my window and risked my neck last night——"

"Yes, yes, I know," she said soothingly. "I appreciate it."

"But you don't!" I said. "I crossed those terrible ledges and endangered my reputation, to leave a set of directions for making a slip-on sweater in his room!"

"You what?" said Peaches, now thoroughly alive.

"Galadia sent them!" I endeavored to explain. "And it was my mistake. Here was your letter all the time!"

For a long period of silence I awaited the storm of her wrath. But it didn't come. Instead she drew a long sobbing breath of relief. [Pg 201]

"Thank heaven he didn't turn me down!" was all she said.

And then slowly we made our way back to the house, our footless errand ended. Peaches stepped inside and feeling for the electric button flooded the room with light.

"No need for secrecy now," she remarked, "so we don't have to break our necks over the furniture as we——"

Her voice broke off into a shrill little scream, and raising her hand she pointed to the mantelpiece. The frame was there, but the Madonna of the Lamp was gone!

XIII

[Pg 202]

At first I could scarcely believe my eyes—but there was the space where once the beautiful picture had hung, the gape showing the paneling behind all too plainly. Aghast I turned to Peaches, who continued to stare.

"What has happened to it?" I asked in an awed tone. "Has it been stolen?"

"You bet your life it has!" she replied, recovering herself. "People don't lock oil paintings up for the night with the silver spoons, you know. Gosh! What a shame! Such a pretty picture, too, and worth a young fortune. Won't Mark be wild though! Do you suppose it was gone when we came through in the dark?"

"Dear me, how should I know?" I demanded. "Though, of course, they will ask us that."

"Yes—sort of awkward, our not having made any light on the way out," she replied. "I suppose we ought to wake Sebastian up right away though, don't you?"

"Certainly!" I responded. "Those men I saw last night the missing watchman—it's all too suspicious to be allowed to wait another moment."

"I'll say it is!" replied Peaches vigorously. "You wait here while I run up and pound on the door!"

"Oh, Peaches! Send a servant!" I implored. "The burglars might be out there in the hall!"

But before the words were fairly out of my mouth she was gone, lighting the house as she went, and in an incredibly short time I could hear her pounding and shouting in the upper hall with a noise that was fit to wake the dead. Shivering with fatigue, but enlivened by the amazing turn which events had taken I occupied myself with switching on all the lights and making sure that the picture had not simply been lifted down for some reason and left in the room. But this was not the case—indeed I acted merely automatically and not because I really expected to find it. In a very few moments Peaches was back, a trifle flushed and breathless. [Pg 203]

"They will be right down!" she announced. "I stirred up pa as well. Now, Free, old thing, what's our story when they do appear? We've got to stick to the same lie, you know, and we've got to say something plausible, because here it is two-thirty in the morning and it's quite obvious that we haven't been to bed, though we went up long before they did."

"Well," I responded hurriedly, for already the two men could be heard on the stairway, "though I deplore the use of untruth I fear we shall have to resort to it in this case. We will say—what on earth shall we say?"

"I had a headache and couldn't sleep," suggested Peaches. "So we came down!"

"Rotten!" I whispered fiercely. "In these clothes? Bah! We sat up late talking and came down intending to get something to eat, and you remembered a book you wanted. Here it is! Sh! They are here!"

Hastily I seized at random a volume from one of the shelves and laid it beside her on the sofa, and an instant later Markheim came bouncing into the room, a purple satin dressing gown flapping about his heels, his scant hair disordered. Closely following was Mr. Pegg, a lean but majestic figure with nightshirt tucked into his dress trousers and a raincoat thrown jauntily over one shoulder—presumably the first garments at hand—his magnificent shock of gray curls giving him somewhat the appearance of a lion roused from slumber. [Pg 204]

"What's all this, what's all this?" cried Sebastian, running up to the mantelpiece. Then he clasped

his hands over his bald spot in a gesture of despair. "Oh!" he moaned. "How perfectly terrible! How perfectly terrible!"

"Great Snakes, ain't that too bad!" observed Mr. Pegg. "Lucky thing you got them picture post cards of it, Mark! Where d'you s'pose the sons of guns got in anyways? And how comes it that you girls are burglar-hunting in your party clothes when you ought to be tearing off a little beauty sleep?"

"We talked so late!" explained Peaches, gazing into her father's eyes with a wonderful, direct, innocent look. "And we got so hungry that we came down to forage—and on the way I dropped in for this book"—she held it up toward him—"and, of course, we noticed right off the bat that the Madonna was gone."

"She ran right up and got you," I added. "And now you know as much as we do."

"Humph!" said Mr. Pegg, still looking at the book his daughter had offered him. "Couldn't sleep without it, eh?"

"This is terrible, this is terrible!" exclaimed our host, paying no attention to anything except his loss. "Ring the bell! Summon everybody! Where is Wilkes? I told him to come down at once."

"You told him?" asked Peaches swiftly. "Where was he?"

[Pg 205]

"In his room, of course!" snapped Markheim. "Spoke to him on the house telephone! What did you suppose? Oh, my precious painting! This is outrageous—outrageous! Did they take anything else?"

Peaches and I exchanged a glance of relief. Wilkes had been in the house. Whatever his mysterious mode of egress, the step we had heard in the garden was no evidence that he had used it to-night.

This thought passed between us in a flash as she replied: "Haven't the faintest idea, old boy. Let's have a look!"

"I want to make sure!" he said. "But first let's see how they did it."

Climbing upon a footstool which he dragged forward for the purpose, Markheim then proceeded to an examination of the picture frame, while we gathered about curiously.

"Can't understand it!" he puffed after a moment of silence. He shook his head like a Japanese doll.

"Can't understand what?" I asked.

"Why, the whole canvas has been removed—stretcher and all!" he cried. "Extraordinary! Extraordinary!"

"Why?" Peaches wanted to know.

"Shows they took their time!" Markheim explained. "Able to unmount the canvas—and it takes skill to roll an old painting! By jove, yes! Usually simply cut it out of the frame, like the Mona Lisa, you know. Only way, really, if you are in a hurry. Yes, they took their time!"

"Then the frame—I mean the stretcher—ought to be somewhere!" suggested Mr. Pegg brightly.

[Pg 206]

"Nonsense—utter nonsense!" exclaimed Markheim, climbing down. "And now let's give a look round. Heaven only knows what else may be gone!"

He preceded us into the corridor, an absurd figure in his gorgeous negligee, and I could not help but note how much better Mr. Pegg appeared by comparison. It is not only women whose appearance is governed by clothes, and, as my dear father used to say, clothes may not make the man but, thank the Lord, they hide him.

Well, at any rate we two timid females followed the stronger members of the exploring party out into the main hall, where we encountered Wilkes. He was fully dressed, perfectly composed, and the very picture of quiet correctness.

"You wished me, sir?" he said.

"Yes. Why the devil were you so long?" snapped Markheim, wishing to vent his annoyance on someone.

"Sorry, sir, I was dressing!" replied the man.

"Well," snarled the master, "there's been a burglary. Most valuable picture in the house's been taken. Call police headquarters at Tarrytown and tell them to send someone out at once. Then get every servant in the house down into the front hall and see that no one leaves the premises! Meanwhile, we'll take a look about."

"Yes, sir," replied the man, after a little gasp of surprise. "Nobody hurt, I trust, sir?"

"No," said Markheim briefly. "I expect it's the same gang you thought you heard last night. Anything heard from Pedro?"

"Nothing, sir," said Wilkes. "I'll telephone at once."

[Pg 207]

He retreated through the servants' hall entrance, where I assume a telephone was placed, and the door swung silently to behind him. I stared after him hard, feeling that I would like to watch him through the thick oaken paneling if only I might. To be sure, the man's demeanor had been perfect; and yet somehow I was not satisfied. My mind kept straining at something half forgotten, as if I were subconsciously endeavoring to hitch him up in my memory. To all appearances this

was no concern of his. He had been in his room when Markheim called him on the service phone. He had been just about long enough in making his appearance to tab up with the completeness of his toilet. To have at once answered the ringing of his bell he must have been in his room before Peaches and I returned to the house, and our position in the garden, coupled with our alertness while there, seemed to warrant the supposition that we must have observed any unusual activity either in the service wing or in the library, through which we had passed an hour and a half earlier.

It was plain that sooner or later questions would be put to us, and to others, which would give rise to the problem of confession or of withholding of the facts concerning our exact movements between the time of our returning and of the announcement of our discovery.

For example, if the police were allowed to work on the supposition that the theft had been committed between twelve and two-fifteen, some clew of inestimable value might easily be discounted by them, for it seemed more than likely that the time was really that between our entrance into the garden and our return to the house. Moreover, there was certainly someone moving about on the garden path while we were concealed by the fountain. Of that there was now no reasonable doubt. Both Peaches and I had distinctly heard a footstep which we thought to be that of Wilkes, while we still expected him to join us; we had even commented on it. And now it was going to be extremely difficult to convey this information without involving ourselves in a very delicate but entangling mesh of complications. As I was turning these facts over in my mind and wondering what course a Talbot ought to pursue under the circumstances Mr. Markheim was taking charge of affairs in a masterly manner, and giving orders with the assurance of a Napoleon in negligee.

[Pg 208]

"You stay here with Miss Freedom, Peaches," he commanded, "while your father and I make the rounds of the place. Sit right there on the big sofa and tell the servants to wait, as they come down. Don't let any of them go out of the hall."

"We better take a couple of shooting irons along," remarked Mr. Pegg, producing a revolver from each pocket of his raincoat in a nonchalant manner. "Never can tell but what there may be an ambush some place."

"All right!" agreed Sebastian, accepting one. "No harm, no harm to have it. Where's that man Wilkes?"

Again as though in answer, Wilkes appeared from under the stairs.

"The police will come at once, sir," he reported. Then, seeing the revolvers: "Shall I go along with you?"

"No," said Markheim. "Get the other servants down, and count noses, damn quick. Then tell Jorkins to make a double shaker of cocktails and some sandwiches and bring them here. We will be back as soon as we can."

[Pg 209]

The three men then departed upon their several errands, leaving us alone for the moment.

"What'll we do—'fess up?" asked Peaches. "I have a feeling that there's going to be hell to pay."

"Alicia!" I remarked. "No lady uses such language, as I have reminded you at least a hundred thousand times! No, I don't think we will say a word about our futile adventure—or, to be accurate, our attempted adventure. At least not unless something brought out by the police seems to demand that we do."

"Have you been taking a good look at him?" she then wanted to know.

"Who? That man Wilkes?" I said.

"No—my ex-fiancé," responded Peaches calmly.

"Which one do you mean?" I demanded.

"Mark," said she.

"Alicia Pegg, what did you say?" I asked severely.

"I said did you take a good look at Sebastian in that purple dressing gown?" she repeated patiently.

"How could I help doing so?" said I with indignation.

"That's just it," she remarked in a tone of finality. "That finishes it!"

"Finishes what?"

"Our engagement," she said firmly. "The combination of temper and dressing gown."

"But with all due modesty you must have expected to see him in a dressing gown after you were married," I protested as delicately as I could.

"And he not only looks like the devil in it but stands there and tells me to sit quiet until he comes back, just as though I wasn't a better shot than he is! Ugh—that dressing gown!"

[Pg 210]

"Well, what did you expect?" I asked helplessly.

"Sandro is dressed," she retorted with apparent irrelevance.

"Don't call him that!" I exclaimed, fairly exasperated with the girl. "You have absolutely no proof that it's Sandro."

"I'll get proof," she said. "You wait—I'll get proof."

"Nonsense!" I said. "Hush up! Here he comes."

But it wasn't the creature after all, but the cook—a distressed and excitable Frenchman in a pointed nightcap and an unconquerable belief that the house was on fire; and for several minutes we were fully occupied with dissuading him of the idea. And after him came the rest of the crew—a straggling, shivering, sleepy, indignant lot, in varying degrees of dishevelment, appearing in twos and threes and huddling in a little group at the foot of the stairway, ready to dart back through the swinging door to their own quarters at an instant's notice, and no doubt planning to give notice as soon as anybody appeared to whom it could be given.

One Irish girl, a kitchen maid, I think she was, had somehow got the idea that a murder had been committed, and called upon her patron saint, whose name seemed to be Ochsaveus, at irregular but emphatic intervals. I think I cannot convey a sense of the complete demoralization of these underlings more dearly than by stating that the chambermaid whose duty it was to take care of my room was wearing one of my own boudoir caps without the least particle of self-consciousness. The only one who had shown any poise at all was Wilkes, who had not reappeared. I was beginning to wish he would come back and set a good example, when at length Sebastian Markheim and dear Mr. Pegg returned unharmed, and announced that they had discovered nothing out of the way.

[Pg 211]

"And not a trace of the horse thieves, either!" said Mr. Pegg. "It's clouded over outside—rain before long, and no use going off without a trail of any kind before morning. Better wait for the sheriff."

"I'd say so, pa," said Peaches. "I wish you'd speak to the help, Mark! They act like a bunch of scared steers."

"Sit down!" commanded Mr. Markheim to his household generally, his hair wilder than ever, his eyes fairly popping out of his head with anger. "Nobody is to leave the hall until I give permission. Where the hell is that food I ordered?"

Somebody rang a bell for him, and after a very short wait Wilkes entered, accompanied by one of the footmen, who bore a tray containing some most welcome refreshment. Peaches and I declined the drink, but Sebastian took three in quick succession.

"Terribly upset, terribly upset!" he remarked as he set down his glass and refilled it. "Somebody is going to pay for this! Where the devil are the police?"

"They are coming a long way pretty late at night," remarked Peaches. "I don't know that I'd come at all in their place, Mark."

He simply glared at her and bit into a cheese sandwich. And then we settled down more or less restlessly to a quarter of an hour of waiting, dividing our attention between the sandwiches, repetition of the obvious facts of the situation, and glances at Markheim's wrist watch.

At length we heard the siren of an automobile at the gates below the hill, and in a few moments more, Wilkes, still the most self-possessed servant present, opened the door to admit the inspector from Tarrytown, who came accompanied by an officer and a third man in plain clothes—presumably a detective.

[Pg 212]

"Good evening—or rather good morning, inspector!" said Mr. Markheim, rising to greet him. "Sorry to have brought you out, but it's not a common burglary at all."

"It's usual to report such things," replied the inspector. "We came as quickly as possible. Nobody hurt, was there?"

"No," said Markheim. "But a picture has been stolen."

The faces of all three newcomers expressed a disgust that was so apparent as to bring a smile even to the face of our profoundly troubled host.

"Wait!" he said. "Did you ever hear of the Madonna of the Lamp, inspector?"

"Can't say that I did," the police official admitted. "And I'm a pretty good Catholic myself."

"Well—it's a painting," Markheim explained, concealing his impatience as best he could, which in point of fact is not saying a great deal for his power of self-control. "It is not only a painting but a very famous one."

"Kind of an antique, eh?" suggested the officer.

"Not only an antique but one of the most famous and valuable paintings in the world. I paid five hundred thousand dollars for it."

At length officialdom seemed impressed.

"And it's been stolen?" said the spokesman of the law.

"What else under God's heaven did you think I sent for you about?" Markheim exploded. "You don't seem to understand this at all!"

[Pg 213]

"Italian, eh?" said the man in plain clothing. "International complications are very possible if the thing gets too much publicity. That's about the idea, isn't it?"

Markheim turned on him in some surprise.

"You seem to know a lot about the Italian Government's theories of ownership!" he snarled.

"So it was brought into the country illegally!" commented the detective. "Captain," he went on,

addressing the now frankly bewildered officer, "you see this picture is not only far more valuable than most great jewels but it has a past almost as complicated as the Hope diamond. It's not unusual that a world-famous work of art should find its way out of Italy in spite of the Italian law, which forbids the export of such things, but the theft is far more remarkable than that of any jewel could possibly be, inasmuch as the supreme difficulty of disposing of the painting once it was stolen is obvious—that's right, isn't it, Mr. Markheim?"

"You explain it very well, very well," replied Markheim, nervous and excited—and truth to tell not a little affected by the cocktails he had imbibed. It was most precarious, taking so many upon an empty stomach, as he should have known. "You have a very clear idea, young man—though allow me to make it plain that I was in no way involved in the original affair of bringing this canvas into the United States. I had nothing whatsoever to do with it—nothing."

"You merely paid five hundred thousand for it after it got here," remarked Peaches. "I see."

The remark, however, seemed to pass unnoticed by anyone save myself.

[Pg 214]

"Have you any suspicion as to who the thief might have been, Mr. Markheim?" asked the inspector, visibly impressed by the huge sum at which the picture was valued.

"Not a very clear suspicion," replied Sebastian.

"Then there is some one?" queried the officer, taking out his notebook and pencil in an important manner.

"We had some trouble last night," replied Mr. Markheim. "Miss Talbot here thought she saw two men in the garden, and came downstairs."

"Ah!" remarked the inspector, scribbling. "Did you get a good look at them, Miss Talbot?"

"Just a glimpse," I replied.

"And where were you when you saw them?" he went on.

For a moment I was nonplussed. Then I recollected that I was not under oath, and told as much of the truth as I deemed warrantable or indeed necessary.

"I was at an upper window," I returned with dignity. "I had gone upstairs for the night."

"Ah!" said the inspector, writing it down. "Could you identify them?"

"Well, one had a funny hat," I said. "I think I would know it again. It was straw—like this young man's." I pointed at the detective, to whom I had taken a dislike—he was altogether too clever to be satisfactory. At once everybody stared at him with suspicion, and the fact gave me considerable comfort. Even the inspector glanced at the young man unpleasantly as he wrote down "straw-hat."

"Did you see anything else?" the inspector went on.

Again I hesitated, for Peaches' eyes were upon me, forbidding me to speak. I could plainly discern that if I told of the circumstances under which I had come upon Wilkes in the library she intended to have what she would have called "an all-round showdown"—a card term, I believe. And so on second consideration I decided to hold my tongue. After all I was not a professional detective; let those who were go ahead and detect.

[Pg 215]

"I merely met one of the menservants who had also seen the intruders," I replied. "And together we roused, or rather found the watchman, and informed him of what we had seen."

"Where is this manservant?" asked the officer. And Wilkes stepped forward.

"Now what did you see?" asked the inquisitor.

"I was awake late, sir," replied Wilkes, "and fancied I heard an unusual noise. It might have been Miss Talbot, sir, but I rather think it was the men she speaks of, sir. The watchman, Pedro, and I went the rounds together but found nothing. He hadn't heard anything, it seems."

"That will do for now," said the officer. "Now, for Pedro—is he present?"

"He has been missing since this—I mean since early yesterday morning," put in Markheim. "Very good man, very good man—I can't understand it, really!"

"Well, perhaps you will understand when we locate him!" replied the law grimly. "And now, if you please, is there any other member of the household missing?"

"No—all here," replied Markheim. "Would you care to take a look now at the room from which the picture was stolen, Mister Inspector?"

"If you please," said that official. "If you will just show me."

[Pg 216]

Without more ado Sebastian Markheim led the way down the corridor to the library, followed closely by the police and that nasty smart little detective, while Mr. Pegg, Alicia and myself brought up the rear. I noticed that Peaches scrutinized Wilkes' face with a long, searching glance as she passed him, but the man remained motionless and expressionless as a wooden image. I could have slapped her for her behavior! But I was not fated to have the opportunity for any such chastisement, or even to think to rebuke her properly, for a cry from Sebastian Markheim's lips as he entered the library door sent us all hurrying after him pell-mell.

And no wonder he had called out in his amazement, for upon entering, lo, there was the Madonna of the Lamp smiling down from her frame as serenely as if she had never been disturbed from it at all!

In one of his discourses upon the art of narrative, whether of fiction or fact, my dear father remarks on the difficulties pertaining to narration in the first person. "For it invariably happens," he says, "that some portion of those events to which the narrator is party, or which directly affects his subsequent actions, will be enacted while he is absent, but which must nevertheless be described by him in order that the sequence of the tale be fully comprehended by the reader. Nevertheless the events so recorded must perforce be obtained at secondhand, and suffer to a certain degree in their quality of convincingsness by reason of their losing direct contact with the author; and however credible the witness from whom the facts are obtained, they must naturally take a certain color from his own personality, and hence a deplorable lack of continuity occurs, which greatly weakens the credibility of the tale."

Very interesting, too, and eminently correct, though I confess that the paragraph, while perfectly familiar to me because of my diligent study of my dear father's writings, was never so clear to me as when I came upon a practical application of it in my own experience; a thought which has very likely occurred to more than one person who has had some sudden occasion to perceive the fundamental truth of a familiar copy-book axiom, such as "Honesty is the best policy," if you understand me. But I digress—or rather, what I mean is this: That while I undertook the writing of this chronicle in order to refute a false impression which the newspapers had created regarding the name of Talbot, and also to retrieve the fair and unsullied name of the Peggs, I find to my dismay that as I reach the crux of the whole matter, I was not actually present at some of the most important events with which my narrative has to deal, and that I must therefore rely on Peaches' account of it. That she was fairly accurate in her statement I feel reasonably certain; but I must confess to some chagrin at missing the best part of the story. It seems to have been my fortune through life to take an active part merely through inadvertence.

[Pg 218]

And yet I scarcely perceive how I could very well have been there when it happened. Two elements intervened to prevent it—an overwhelming desire for the sleep of which I had been deprived for the best part of two nights, and the natural desire on Peaches' part that she have privacy for what she was about to do. Which, of course, did not develop until after the departure of the police inspector and his henchmen.

In the first place, of course, we were simply dumfounded at finding the Madonna of the Lamp in her proper place. How it had got there and by whom it was returned was an overwhelming mystery. No less astonishing was the question as to where it had been during its absence. I am quite sure that the policemen felt that a hoax of some kind had been perpetrated and they were not to blame for experiencing a very considerable annoyance at being pulled out of bed or out of office or some such thing and motoring all that long way for nothing. They were distinctly annoyed. That is, all except the little one without a uniform, who it later developed was not a detective at all. Indeed at the time we should have realized that he was altogether too clever for a detective. He was, in point of fact, a newspaper reporter. And it was through his efforts that we were subjected to all the mortification of so much publicity.

[Pg 219]

Well, at any rate, he was the only person who did not seem to think he had been disturbed for nothing. On the contrary, he made a number of notes about the picture, the painter of it, the name and status of every person present, with a fiendish correctness; no detail of possible interest to the public eluded him. And no wonder his printed version was so completely correct, as, under the impression that he was an officer of the law, I myself supplied the information.

It was almost another hour before the excitement died down, the three men took their departure, and the servants were packed off to bed.

I regret that it is here necessary to chronicle the fact that Mr. Markheim had taken rather too many cocktails; but such is the painful truth. His wealth having made a large cellar possible, he was inclined to prodigality in this direction, and each of the series of nervous shocks which he experienced served as an excuse for another drink. And when the last servant, including Wilkes, had gone upstairs, he was, I must admit it, quite elevated by the alcoholic stimulants in which he had indulged upon his own prescription. In rather simpler language, Mr. Pegg crudely referred to his prospective son-in-law as having "a considerable snoot full." An unscientific but descriptive statement.

"Well—I am going to hit the old alfalfa!" Pinto announced. "Time for everybody to turn in!"

"I'm going to sit on this sofa all night!" announced Sebastian with alcoholic determination. "Can't tell, can't tell, they might come back!"

[Pg 220]

"Oh, might they!" said Mr. Pegg. "Well, I don't care to see the beauties. I have an idea that they will let that oil painting alone for quite a season now. Good night."

"Come, Peaches," I said stiffly, for Sebastian was not a sight to inspire much liking or approval. "Come on to bed, that's a good girl."

There was a curious gleam in that young woman's golden eyes, however, and her mouth had a set look about it which I had never seen there before except upon one occasion; and that was on the ranch when one of the Japanese foremen was insolent to her. He went away like a whipped dog, I recall, and afterward proved himself the best man we had. And to do this with a Jap is an achievement, I assure you. And all she had done was to speak to him. She was no shrew, but she

had a sharp way of presenting an unpleasant truth. I glanced at the recumbent Markheim in pity, even before she answered me.

"I have something to say to Mark," she replied quietly. "I will come up later. Don't wait for me."

Well, what could a chaperon do under these conditions except comply? Besides, I have not the vitality of extreme youth, and sleep was on the very verge of overwhelming me. Besides, which, Mr. Pegg exchanged a glance with me, which reënforced his daughter's request; and so saying good night to the engaged pair we left them and climbed the stairs in company. In another hour it would be dawn and the house was very ghostly. It was immensely comforting to have dear Mr. Pegg accompany me to my door, though once there he sprang a rather disconcerting surprise.

"Say—do you know what book that was Peaches came down to get?" he asked with twinkling eyes as he opened my door for me. "Rather curious reading for a young girl. I don't want her tastes to get perverted."

[Pg 221]

"What—what book was it?" I inquired, disturbed.

"You ought to look after what she reads more carefully," said her father with some severity. "It was Kimball's Commercial Arithmetic. Good-night, Miss Free!"

And with that he was gone, leaving me to digest his statement as best I could. However, the significance of the remark was soon obliterated by a heavy slumber which lasted until I was roused by Peaches, who brought me an eleven-o'clock breakfast and the astonishing story of what occurred after I had retired. I will not attempt to tell it in her own language, for she was incurably given to the use of slang, but will endeavor to present in their proper sequence the events as they occurred.

As soon as Peaches was left alone with her fiancé the disgust and repulsion which had been rapidly mounting in her breast all evening reached its apex in expression. True, Sebastian Markheim was no different from what he had been right along—a little less attractive, rather more grotesquely disordered and a little more drunken, perhaps, but Markheim just the same—slightly accented, that was all. But the small exaggerations were enough to drive her wild. Coming to light as they did at a moment when she was at the highest possible tension, when for forty-eight hours she had been living with the animate ghost of her old and far deeper love, the spectacle of this disorganized little millionaire with his ungroomed head, his preposterous purple satin wrapper, his stupid drunkenness and his ineffective querulousness about his picture was too much for her. The very thought of marrying him became more than the mere impossibility which it had been from the moment when her memories of Sandro had been quickened into new life. This marriage, now only a few weeks distant, became an actual horror. She felt unable to face the thought of it another hour. And so, despite his condition, she set about making a clean break.

[Pg 222]

"Mark," said she in a low strained voice, towering over him as he sat in a crumpled heap upon the big sofa before the fire place, "Mark—I am not going to marry you."

"Eh? What's that, what's that?" said he.

"I said that it's all off!" Peaches affirmed. "I couldn't marry you—not on a bet. I'm awfully sorry of course. Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you!" he said, getting to his feet and seizing her by the hand. "Here—sit down a minute—you can't do that, you know—sit down and let's talk this over!"

She did not want to do so, but his grip upon her arm was strong, and rather than cross him she complied.

"You don't understand—I'm breaking it off," she said firmly.

"But what have I done?" Sebastian asked. "Come on now—don't be mad at me! Didn't I pet you enough to-night? Come—give us a kiss and forget it!"

"I don't want to kiss you!" said Peaches, drawing away from his advance. "Please, Mark! I'm trying to tell you that I had the wrong dope—I never loved you enough to marry you, and to-night I got a gleam of light I can't go through with it."

"Not go through with it!" he replied sullenly. As the fact that she really meant what she said slowly penetrated to his befuddled brain a look of anger took the place of the maudlin affection which had been in his face a moment before. "Not go through with it—but you—you promised. Why, the wedding invitations go out to-morrow—impossible not to go through with it!"

[Pg 223]

"I'm sorry—but you heard me," said she. "I don't love you."

"But I love you!" he burst out. "And as for love—you don't know anything about it. What can a great big kid like you know about love? You'll love me when we are married! Stop your nonsense and give us a kiss!"

He made a lunge at her, which she managed to evade, moving over to the opposite end of the sofa. But quick as a cat Markheim was after her. He was just drunk enough to have lost his head, but not drunk enough to be clumsy. It was at this moment that Peaches began to be afraid of him.

"No, no!" she cried, trying to get away from his pudgy hands. "I tell you I don't love you—please! Let me alone. Mark, don't make me afraid!"

"Why should you be afraid?" he asked thickly. "You are going to marry me—do you hear? I've stood your offishness long enough. I've kept away from you whenever you said. I've been a fool! But you are mine, understand? Mine! You've promised. Everyone knows it, and by heaven I'll take

you when I see fit. Come here!"

Peaches felt as if she were caught in the meshes of some horrid dream. With a sudden wrench she broke loose from him, darting round the end of the sofa. But with an amazing agility Markheim vaulted the back and was after her, hot in a pursuit made silent by the thickness of the heavy carpet, their panting breath the only noise in the big room. A single lamp was the only light, but it was enough to show her his face, purple, bestial—suggesting a chasm of horror.

[Pg 224]

Swift as she was she could not escape him. He was at the door behind her, barring her way, smiling terribly. Then at the French windows as quickly as she reached them, his hot moist hands upon hers, even as she seized the knob. Then back across the room again in fierce pursuit. He seemed to have gone quite mad and become possessed with an uncanny swiftness and strength. Then Peaches stumbled across a great chair, and in another instant his arms were about her, his hot breath upon her face.

"Help!" she cried, struggling to release her hands, which he held behind her back. "Help! Sebastian—you beast—let me go, let me go!"

And then the whirlwind happened. Some terrific force like a giant cloud of vengeance tore the satyr from her; and there was Sandro, his face white and fierce. With a single gesture he had thrown Markheim half across the room, and stood with squared fists waiting for the assault which came almost at once.

"You rotter!" sang out the newcomer. "Take your dirty hide out of here!"

With a howl of rage and surprise Markheim picked himself up and came at his manservant with purple face and popping eyes.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he shouted. "Leave the room!"

"Not until I've given you the thrashing of your life!" replied the valet. "Come and get your punishment if you won't clear out!"

[Pg 225]

And Markheim came. With a roar he flew at the man, striking blindly, wildly, and uttering a volley of language which was in itself a shower of blows. How long they fought Peaches hardly knows. Crouched against the mantelshelf as if seeking the protection of the calmly smiling Virgin above, she watched the two men struggle to a finish. She was fascinated, terrified, and at the same time fiercely exalted. The end came abruptly, with Markheim sprawling on the floor, and Sandro slowly raising himself to a towering figure of contemptuous victory above his employer.

"Get up!" he said, panting, as he administered a kick to the prostrate body of the other man. "That will do, I expect. Get up!"

Moaning, Sebastian obeyed, his face streaked with blood from a cut upon his forehead, his left eye swollen and rapidly turning as purple as the tattered remains of his dressing gown.

"I'll have the law on you for this!" he warned, fumbling for his handkerchief.

"Come here!" commanded the servant in a voice of authority.

"Help!" squeaked Markheim. But before he could utter another sound Wilkes had him by the collar, and was dragging him to where Peaches still cowered against the wall.

"None of that nonsense!" commanded Sandro. "If you yell I'll have to give you another drubbing. Now get down on your knees and ask her pardon!"

For an instant Markheim attempted to disobey. But his captor raised his hand and as though at a signal Sebastian fell groveling on the floor before Peaches, bubbling repentance—a loathsomely servile thing from which she shrank.

[Pg 226]

"Oh, take him away!" she begged. "I hate him so! Take him away!"

"You hear what she says!" said her rescuer grimly. "Go now! Make haste or I will throw you out!"

With some difficulty Markheim got upon his feet and made for the door.

"The police!" he said. "I will have the police! Oh, my face—my face!"

He had found his handkerchief now, and staggered out of the room, holding it to his wound and mumbling imprecations.

Slowly Peaches emerged from her torpor of fright and looked at the man who an hour earlier had been a servant. He was transformed. His shoulders were squared, his eyes alive, his face flushed—he was her boy-lover again. There was no mistake. Now she knew him beyond the shadow of a doubt. If she had ever really questioned his identity, from this moment there was no room for questioning left. All the tightening of her heartstrings, long drawn taut by repression, relaxed. It was as if her whole being had suddenly been flooded with warm sunlight.

"Sandro!" she said, going toward him with outstretched arms. "Sandro, my love, my love!"

For one second she saw the unwitting, involuntary response in his eyes. Then he looked down, that she might not behold it, and drawing himself up he clicked his heels together and bowed. Though he trembled as he did so, his voice was controlled.

"Miss Pegg," he said, "I—I am happy to have served you! Good night."

"Sandro!" cried Peaches. "Why do you pretend? I know you—I know. You couldn't fool me now! My dear, I thought that you were dead. But even on the day we got here I knew you—I knew you in the hall, that first moment. Oh, why do you keep away from me like that? Don't you love me—"

[Pg 227]

don't you want me? Why do you pretend?"

"Don't! Please!" he entreated. "Miss Pegg, I—am just a servant in this house!"

"I don't care what you are!" she cried recklessly. "You are Sandy. I know you and I love you."

"My God!" he said, the familiar pet name striking home at last. "Don't! You cannot understand my position. I tell you I am a servant. It is some chance resemblance."

She switched on the main light then and came nearer, scanning his face closely. His hands clenched at his sides, but otherwise he remained immovable.

"You cannot make me doubt," she said at length. "You are Sandro di Monteventi, who was reported killed at——"

"Miss Pegg—don't make it too hard!" he said humbly. "Will you not accept my statement and let me go?"

"No!" she said fiercely. "Because I know who you are—and because I know that you love me. There! I have told the truth!"

"It is true that I love you," he admitted. "One need not have seen you for longer than a day for that. But why do you persist I am this stranger?"

"Because I know it!" she declared.

"You could not prove it!" he said simply.

"I don't have to!" she said, going closer. "Oh, Sandy, Sandy, I love you so! I have been hungry for you such a long, long time!"

She slipped her arms round his neck. And then for a long while she was not conscious of anything except his lips upon hers, and the blessed iron strength of his arms about her. At length he drew away, just far enough to look into her eyes.

"Merciful Madonna!" he breathed. "You are too much for my poor strength. I have no right to touch you—but how I love you!"

"I knew it! I knew it!" cried Peaches, wild with triumphant happiness, "you'll never get away from me again, Sandro mio!"

But he pushed her from him roughly.

"No, no!" he said. "I—you are wrong! You have got to believe you are wrong, even though you hate yourself and me as well for the glimpse of heaven you have given me."

But she could not let him go.

"Have I got to have any other proof?" she laughed. "Oh, my dear, my dear! Good heavens—what is it?" she added in a changed tone, for he was looking over her shoulder toward the end of the room with an expression as if he had seen a ghost.

Automatically she turned to follow the direction of his gaze, and almost instantly encountered another pair of eyes set deep in a white face that stared in at the window. In another instant it was gone, and like a flash her companion had seized her by the elbows and was holding her with a gaze that riveted her attention.

"See here!" he said rapidly. "I've got to leave you. They've got me this time, I'm afraid. But I'll make a dash for it. Say nothing if I get away. Silence will help me most. And no matter who I am, I love you. It will not hurt you to know that. Good-by!"

Abruptly he was gone, slipping from the great room as noiselessly as he had entered it, his going swift as a shadow, and leaving Peaches temporarily paralyzed and at a loss. With a tremendous effort she pulled her wits together and started for the doorway through which he had vanished. To reach it she had to pass the mantelpiece, and as she did so she automatically raised her eyes to the painting whose calm beauty had been the cause of so much turmoil, and a curious glitter on the lower edge of the frame caught her eye. The flash was such a brilliant one that despite her pre-occupation she stopped to examine its source. And then with a little cry of triumph she stretched out her hand toward it.

On the lower carvings of the ornate Florentine frame lay a little gold penknife studded with diamonds—her own jeweled penknife, the one with which Sandro di Monteventi had cut that long-faded rose in the garden at San Remo—the precious trinket which she had given him for a keepsake. The proof! It was the proof positive! In a single flash a great deal became clear. He had left it there earlier in the evening—at the time the picture was missed—perhaps at the time it was put back!—and missing it he had later returned to retrieve it when he fancied that every one was asleep, and so had stumbled upon her scene with Markheim, and come to her rescue. Seizing the tell-tale toy she kissed it wildly and started for the door.

"Sandro! I have proof!" she cried, though she knew he could not hear her.

"Proof of what, signorina?" said a voice in the doorway. And there, blocking the entrance to the corridor, was the figure of a bearded man. With a cry Peaches shrank back, instinctively hiding the knife in the palm of her hand. The intruder had a sinister look. His hat was pulled well down over his eyes and his coat collar was pulled up about his ears.

"What do you want?" demanded Peaches huskily. "What are you doing here?"

She was retreating toward the bell as she spoke, the man's gaze following her action without

[Pg 228]

[Pg 229]

[Pg 230]

protest. Coming well into the room he removed his hat, shaking a few drops from it as he did so. The shoulders of the coat were also wet. Evidently it was raining heavily outside. His face as revealed in the stronger light was less alarming, and he spoke in an even tone.

"Ring by all means!" said he. "Bring help as soon as possible! As for who I am," he went on, throwing back his wet coat and revealing a silver badge, "I am Pedro, the missing night watchman, and I have a warrant of extradition for the arrest of Sandro di Monteventi, alias The Eel—wanted by the International Secret Service for the theft of the Scarpia panels and sundry charges."

"Go on, ring, miss," said a second man, following in on the heels of the first; a man whom Peaches instantly recognized as the face at the window. "Ring, please—we know he is in the house—and incidentally don't you try to get away. We want to talk to you—you seemed to know him rather well."

XV

[Pg 231]

With a violent movement Peaches rang the bell. And almost at once the house was again in confusion. The two newcomers, backed by the cursing Markheim and aided by Mr. Pegg, made straight for the room occupied by Sandro. Peaches followed in their wake, and saw them batter down the door—to find an empty room and a gaping window.

Of course! The idiots! Now if they had only had sense enough to wake me up I could have told them better! But no, they let me sleep—sleep, mind you, when all this, as it were, human motion picture was proceeding right under my very nose! I feel outraged, indignant, as I consider the lack of forethought and consideration which this lack of attention evidenced. Of course the duke escaped—the ninnies should have left some one outside in the garden—and their excuse that they did not believe that he could escape so rapidly from the third story of the house would have been made quite unnecessary if I had been there to inform them of his nocturnal wanderings as known to me.

Really, as I listened to Peaches' recital I became quite distinctly vexed. The fate by which I seemed doomed to remain a bystander looking on at life from a safe distance or merely to be told about it at secondhand or to read of it in printed form was really too annoying. Despite my utmost endeavor I was apparently to be cheated of active participation in the great drama of existence.

[Pg 232]

But no one could look at Peaches' pale and suffering beauty for long and remain unindulgent. And as I lay in the great bed enjoying the tea and toast which she had so thoughtfully brought me I restrained the comments which sprang to my lips and merely asked, "What happened then?"

"We came downstairs," said Peaches slowly, twisting the amber beads about her throat, "Mark, pa and myself along with these two cowbird detectives. I tell you, Free, I just could hardly believe the story they told. But I had to, in the end. You see, for one thing, as I sat there I began to realize I had seen the Pedro once before."

"Where?"

"In a London movie house—and in a hotel bedroom at Monte Carlo," said she significantly.

"There!" I cried. "I foiled him twice, you see! Now it's a lucky thing I wasn't there last night, isn't it? Humph! I'd probably have defeated justice again! But what did he say?"

"He's been after Sandro for years," she narrated. "I am afraid there isn't the shadow of a doubt, Free, but that Sandy is the cleverest picture thief in the world. They have almost got him half a dozen times, but never with conclusive evidence. And thank God, they didn't get him this time, either—not yet at least! Why, do you know, they are certain that he took the Scarpia panels? It seems, if you remember, that they thought that they had been found in the cellar. But it wasn't the originals that they found. They were reproductions—synthetic pictures, like a near-ruby—do you get me?"

"But the recovery was reported in the papers," I objected.

[Pg 233]

"The French Government hushed the matter up in order to try and catch him off his guard," she went on. "And, Free, that's just what he has done in this very house."

"How do you mean—explain yourself grammatically if possible," said I.

"I mean that the Madonna of the Lamp which is hanging in the library at this moment is the bunk," replied Peaches earnestly. "It's a fake—painted on new canvas and nicely antiqued. The cops took it down and showed it to us."

"And what did he want to steal a fake for?" I demanded.

"He didn't want to steal a fake, you dear old prune!" said Peaches, half laughing. "He wanted to steal the original, and that's exactly what he did."

"And got away with it!" I gasped, astonished into a colloquialism. "But when and how on earth?"

"Very simple, but clever," she told me, quite as if it were to the young man's credit. "He had this fake all ready on a stretcher in his room. He took the original, stretcher and all, out of the frame and upstairs, where he unmounted it and hid it—it isn't large, you know. And then, before he could slip the substitute into place, you and I came in from the garden—from the garden where

we had been waiting for him to—to—"

Here she broke off and began to laugh hysterically.

"Come, come, my dear!" I cried. "Don't do that—just remember what a lucky escape you have had. So we interrupted him before he could put the substitute in place! Well, land of goodness! I do recall that he was all dressed when he came down stairs at Mr. Markheim's command! Go on, do, my dear!"

[Pg 234]

"Well," said Peaches, complying with renewed composure, "this Pedro-bird claims that Sandy slipped it in while we were all out in the hall with the servants and he was in and out apparently taking care of Markheim's orders. If the secret-service men hadn't been on the job Sandy would in all probability have simply stayed his two weeks out as a quiet well-behaved servant, and then gone away with a first-class reference and the original Madonna, and the substitution might never have been found out, or it might have been years—until some feast was held by a lot of experts at Mark's invitation—who knows! And he's been doing this sort of thing for years and years!"

"Extraordinary! Most extraordinary!" I exclaimed, pulling off my nightcap and starting to rise. "I must really dress and descend to take a look at that picture and the scene of the crime!"

"You can't!" said Peaches, suddenly listless. "You can't—we are both locked in!"

I could scarcely believe my ears. But Peaches was in earnest, there was no doubt about that.

"Locked in!" I repeated incredulously. "What on earth are you saying, Alicia Pegg?"

"I was saying a mouthful!" she responded. "Pa has locked us in."

"But what for?" I demanded with proper indignation.

"I told him I was going to follow Sandro," said Peaches, as if the explanation was the most obvious thing possible and she were just a trifle impatient of my stupidity.

"Are you crazy?" I cried. "Follow him—follow that thief—that—that scoundrel? Aren't the police following him? Isn't that following enough?"

[Pg 235]

"That's just why," she announced. "Wherever he is—wherever he goes, I am going too. After last night I can't do anything else. And if it's to jail—all right, I'll go to jail. But I won't stay away from him, and I will find him if the secret-service can't, and I hope most heartily they will make a flivver of it. And I'll never leave him again—believe me!"

I was obliged to believe her. I had, indeed, only to look at her in order to do so. And as I looked, a gleam of human intelligence broke into my brain.

"Peaches," I said solemnly, "did you tell on Markheim?"

"Of course not!" she said, flushing hotly. "He—wasn't himself; I realize that now."

"So you just told your father that you are through with Markheim and are in love with the duke?"

She nodded dumbly.

"No wonder he locked you up!" I gasped, falling back on the pillows.

"Locked me up and said the marriage would go ahead as per schedule," she announced grimly. "Which is bunk of course. The point is—what shall we do about it?"

"Have they caught the duke?" I inquired.

"I don't believe so," said she. "There is nothing to that effect in the early afternoon newspapers from New York, though there's plenty about the robbery. Take a look!"

"Let me see!" I exclaimed, stretching out my hand for the paper.

And forthwith she spread the lurid sheets before my distressed eyes. The headlines were of the variety known as "scare." Not the German ex-Kaiser himself, or even a Bolshevik labor leader was ever presented in larger type than was the lurid announcement of the attempted robbery. And all our names were mentioned—even that of Talbot—the sacred family name, which we had kept inviolate for generations against all newspaper publicity excepting only mention in the society and political columns. For, of course, the difference between one's appearing as a social or political item and as a piece of mere vulgar news must at once be apparent to any reader of refined upbringing. And never before had the Talbots been news. I dreaded to think how my sister Euphemia would take it should the article chance to meet her eye. She might eventually forgive me much; but I seriously doubted whether her charity would ever extend over newspaper headlines. Alas! This was but a foretaste of what was to come!

[Pg 236]

But much as the reporters had to say of the splendor of Sebastian Markheim's mansion and the beauty of Sebastian Markheim's fiancée, whose coming marriage would be of the greatest social consequence, uniting the greatest fortune of the East with the greatest fortune of the Western Coast, and so on, and though it was further replete with details of the method by which the robbery had been committed, together with a florid account of the robber's high station in life, his heroic action in battle, where he was supposed to have been killed while defending a position single-handed in a rocky pass during the Austrian invasion, thereby enabling the rest of his brigade to escape—nothing indicated that his capture was at this time considered very likely. The authorities were full of assurances but rather short on facts, to all appearances.

"Well, now, Alicia, my dear," I remarked when I had satisfied myself that no detail of importance had escaped me in my perusal of the printed account of our affair—"now, Alicia, my dear," said I.

[Pg 237]

"I feel it incumbent to be quite sure that you know what you are saying when you announce your intention of linking your life with that of this wild young Italian—always provided that the gallows does not get him before you do. Can't you reconcile yourself to the idea that he is a thief, no matter how titled, and that therefore he is no match for an honest American girl?"

"Oh, cut the moralizing, Free!" interrupted Peaches. "I am in love with him, I tell you. And I have sufficient faith in my own integrity to believe that this wouldn't be true if he really was the yellow dog everybody seems bent on trying to make him out. Now I've got a hunch—a mighty straight hunch that he is O. K. There's more to this than we know. Maybe the old picture belonged to his great-grandmother or something, and he's only taking it back. How do you know he isn't doing just that very thing?"

"But the Scarpia panels didn't belong to his grandmother," I answered smartly.

"But they haven't got the goods on him for those other deals," she retorted. "And if they had, I'd still be crazy about him. Freedom, this is a question of the rest of my life. You've got to take my side."

"But what are you—we going to do?" I pleaded, bewildered by her intensity. "And what is all this nonsense about our being locked in these rooms?"

"You just try to get out and see if it's nonsense," replied Peaches. "You were asleep when they locked me in, and as there is no lock on the doors between our rooms they locked you too. I wouldn't let them disturb you, not only because you were so tired but because I knew damn well that if I let you out I wouldn't get this chance to talk to you."

[Pg 238]

"Well, this is outrageous!" I exclaimed, rising in good earnest this time. "We shall see whether your father can imprison two adult women in a free country to suit his whim! I shall make my toilet at once and then we shall see what we shall see!"

"Better hurry up then!" replied Peaches. "Because they—he and Mark—are going to the city on the twelve-o'clock train. Don't you remember why we came home early last night?"

Last night seemed a thousand years ago. But she was quite right; I did recall the fact, and accordingly made all possible haste, Peaches assisting me.

"Now look here, you flighty young thing!" she warned. "Don't do anything rash! Remember, you are the only person I have to depend on for help. Don't go get yourself kept away from me now!"

"I must and shall interview your father," I protested. "But perhaps if you would be kind enough to give me an idea of what you intend doing I shall be in a better position to be of assistance."

"I'm going to leave this house before another twenty-four hours are over," she declared firmly. "If you can persuade pa to let me go like a human, and come along with me, so much the better. If not, I'll have to go some other way that may not be as agreeable to him in the long run."

"Why not let me tell him about that terrible performance of Mr. Markheim's?" I suggested. "That will be sufficient, or I mistake your father greatly."

"Sure it would be sufficient," said Peaches. "But then I'd have to give myself away pretty badly, wouldn't I? And there might be a roughhouse. Pa is a dead shot and I'd rather get him out of shooting distance before I break the information to him. At present he just about thinks I'm crazy in the head."

[Pg 239]

"Well, I'll do what I can to persuade him that this is the twentieth century and not the middle ages!" I responded. "This indignity certainly cannot be allowed to continue. But suppose you—we do get away from here to-day, what then? How do you propose to find a thief that the police will have a hard time discovering?"

"I don't propose," said Peaches. "I intend. That's a whole lot stronger. How, I haven't the remotest idea. But it's plain enough I can't do anything while they've got me cooped up like a marketable yearling, can I? Let's get out of this, that's the first thing to accomplish."

"Very well," I agreed, gathering up my reticule and taking up the house-telephone receiver.

I asked to speak with Mr. Pegg. The request was at once attended to by the footman who responded, and in a tone which brooked no delay I commanded the Citrus King to come upstairs and release me. My tone must have foreshadowed the mood I was in, for he responded as if by magic. In less than five minutes I was face to face with him in the hall.

"Come on over and sit down in the conservatory, Miss Free," he entreated as soon as he saw my face. "We want to keep the servants out of this much as we can, you know!"

"All right, Mr. Pegg," I agreed, for this was my own thought. "All right. But if you allow the situation to continue you will have a hard time in doing that!"

Accordingly we repaired down the corridor to a little glass room full of plants, where we could talk in seclusion. Mr. Pegg, as usual, chewed upon an unlighted cigar and looked at me thoughtfully over the top of it, his shrewd eyes half closed.

[Pg 240]

"You've got awfully pretty hair, Miss Free," said he unexpectedly. "I'm glad you've took back to them curls again."

"Now see here, Mr. Pegg," I said severely, not to be diverted by any frivolous remarks. "Now see here, Mr. Pegg, what is the meaning of this outrageous performance?"

"When I was a cattleman," said Mr. Pegg, looking at the ornate ceiling, "we used to lock 'em in a corral until they cooled off a little."

"What—who?" I demanded.

"The ones we was breaking," he informed me. Then his manner changed and he brought his big fist down on his knee with a thump. "Now, my dear lady," he said firmly, "I know what I'm doing. Why, I had to keep her on the ranch, watched like a hawk—and simply because she kept thinking she was in love with some undesirable or other. I've seen her do this before. So I'm just going to detain her where she'll be safe until she comes to her senses."

"Mr. Pegg, you are taking the wrong track with Peaches this time!" I warned him. "You can't play the Roman father with your child and marry her out of hand—you cannot! You engaged me as a social mentor and I would be doing less than my duty if I didn't inform you that this sort of thing is no longer being done in the best families!"

"Say!" remarked Mr. Pegg, removing the cigar and staring at me. "Are you trying to be humorous, or what?" [Pg 241]

"I assure you I am far from any such idea!" I replied with hauteur. "I merely affirm that you cannot, even legally, keep an adult female child imprisoned against her will and then marry her off to—to a swindler!"

"A swindler!" exclaimed Mr. Pegg. "Oh, come now, Miss Free—smuggling in that picture wasn't Mark's fault. You can't say he did it—because you don't know it. Why, you and he have always been good friends; you're not going back on him now? Peaches is just a kid. By the end of the week she will have changed her mind again. Good heavens, look at the fix it would put us in if she insisted on breaking her engagement now! The invitations out, the presents coming in—trousseau bought! We'd be the laughingstock of the country. Not that I'd give a—cuss—if it wasn't that I know Alicia. She'd up and go back to him when it was all thoroughly broken off. You see that what she needs is the high hand. I've had to use it before."

"Mr. Pegg," said I, "you are mistaken. What is worse, you are a cave man! I am convinced Peaches really is in love with Sandro di Monteventi and that you will break her heart if you persist in your heroic attitude. I beg you will desist."

"Nothing doing!" said Mr. Pegg, rising and lighting the cigar—a sign that the interview was closed. "I'm not in a desisting mood. I may as well add that I am wise to the fact that she's been mooning round after that fellow ever since she came into this house. Kimball's Commercial Arithmetic, indeed!"

"I don't know to what you refer, I assure you!" I said stiffly. "And I insist upon at least having a key to our rooms." [Pg 242]

"Will you give me your word of honor not to use that key to let her out with?" asked my employer doubtfully.

"Certainly, if you wish," I replied promptly. "You may have my word for that!"

"Well, here you are, then," he answered, taking a key from a great cluster on his ring. "You'll keep the letter of your word, I know, no matter how uneasy the spirit gets. And now I must mosey along. Mark and I have to run up to town on business, and he wants to see the family-doctor about his eye—he ran into his bedpost in the dark last night, and maybe it's just as well to keep Peaches from seeing him wearing that beauty spot."

With which intelligent and discerning remark Mr. Pegg left me to my own devices, and of course I promptly returned to my apartment and the waiting Peaches, who greeted my entrance the more eagerly when she observed I let myself in with a key.

"You wonder!" cried she, embracing me with a look of rapture. "So he gave in to you—you enchantress!"

"He did not!" I said dryly. "He put me on my honor not to let you have this key, and my honor is sacred, and I'm going to keep it that way!"

"Free—you beast!" cried Peaches. "Give it to me. Don't be absurd!"

"Keeping one's freely given word is never absurd," I observed. "Besides, if I were to break it and let you walk out, do you think for one minute that the servants would let you get away without protest? Or without notifying your father by telephone? It is you who are absurd!"

"That's so!" said Peaches, suddenly weary. "Oh, Free—you think it out! Help me, I am so tired." [Pg 243]

"Lack of sleep," I pronounced. "And I'll wager you have eaten nothing. The first thing to do is to have a nice hot luncheon sent upstairs—I presume your father's instructions permit the service of food. And then you must get a few hours of complete rest while I take a stroll in the fresh air and perfect some course of action."

"Then you will help me?" said Peaches eagerly.

It was really pathetic to see her so comparatively tired and helpless. She was never more than comparatively so, I may state. However, my compassion for her was not lessened by this fact.

"Of course I am going to help you," I declared. "That any mere man should attempt a performance of this kind outside of Bolshevik Russia is too outrageous to be endured. But first take some hot soup and a nap. I will have a plan when you wake up, I feel sure."

Meekly as a little girl she submitted to my ministrations, hot broth and all. And when at length she lay sleeping amidst the golden glory of her loosened hair, her face like a pale sage lily in its midst, I stole downstairs, first faithfully locking the door behind me and pocketing the key.

The garden between walls was filled with the roseate glow of sunset as I stepped forth into it, and the night promised fair. The earth was damp and fragrant from the April storm of the night before, and the new buds seemed to have doubled their endeavor to make the world green overnight. On the edges of the paths the frail hothouse-born tulips lay beaten into the earth. But in the meadow toward the river the wild crocuses marched bravely. Robins were warbling their mellow sunset note, and the world seemed sweetly peaceful and greatly at variance with my mood.

[Pg 244]

With my mind continually revolving the problem at hand I walked about the bordered barren beds with a step that was listless enough in good sooth, pausing now and again to glance up at the walls of the fine dwelling, which was now to all intents and purposes a prison. And after a few turns I began to realize that my attention was turning more and more frequently to the window that had been Sandro's and to the problem of his escape.

That he had come out by the window upon the first occasion of my discovering him in the library, and simply let himself in at the casement door, was plain enough, leaving his door locked from the inside to avoid invasion by the other servants; indeed it had developed that it had been his habit to keep his door locked during the entire period of his employment in the house. But how had he got there? That was the question. So far as one could see there was absolutely no means of reaching the ground from that third story, unless one excepted a frail and narrow wooden lattice intended for the encouragement of vines, which extended upward to the level of the higher windows.

Obeying an impulse I went over and made examination of this lattice, and the riddle was a riddle no longer.

"I wonder, I wonder!" I said aloud.

"I often have, myself!" agreed a cheerful voice behind me.

With a guilty start I turned about, and there, of all people on earth, was Richard, the chauffeur, big nose and all, smiling at me in his familiar, friendly manner.

[Pg 245]

"Richard!" I cried warmly. "What brought you here?"

"I—say, Aunt Mary, I had to come, that was all," he said with troubled eyes. "It's Peaches. You know how I feel about her—how I have felt all along. I had to see her. It was as if she needed me. Just a fool hunch. But I came. I couldn't help it—you understand?"

"Understand?" I cried. "Bless the boy, I do!" Then a way out of our situation began to make itself clear in my brain and I seized him by the arm, dragging him to a bench out of general sight from the house and making him sit beside me, greatly to his bewilderment.

"Richard," I said solemnly, "have you been at the house yet?"

"Why, no!" said he. "I came right into the garden when I saw you from the drive."

"Does anybody know you are coming?"

"Not a soul!" declared Dicky. "Why all this mystery?"

"Listen!" I said rapidly. "Something awful has happened. Peaches is a prisoner. Your intuition was right. She—we need your help, and need it badly."

"Is she hurt?" he asked. "A prisoner? What in the name——"

"I want you to get a big powerful automobile and have it at the entrance of the park at twelve o'clock to-night. As soon as you arrive, park your car, and come to the foot of that trellis over there. When you get there give the whistle you used to call Peaches with. If you get an answer, wait for us. If after half an hour you don't hear anything, call me on the telephone first thing in the morning. Is that clear?"

[Pg 246]

"Yes—but Great Scott! What's wrong?"

"Never you mind, except that something is very wrong here. Markheim is an unspeakable beast, and Mr. Pegg is trying to force Peaches into going through with the marriage in spite of what she has found out. He has locked her in her room, which opens into mine."

"Well, why not unlock her, then?" he asked with stupid masculine simplicity. "Haven't you got a key?"

"I have," I said. "But I have given him my word not to unlock it to let her out!"

"But you'll break your word!" he said with a satisfied grin.

"Not at all!" I disclaimed the suggestion. "Not at all. However, I made no promise in regard to the window. And with your assistance——"

"I get you!" cried Dicky, springing to his feet. "Twelve sharp to-night it is. And I'd better be off now before the old boys get back from town and spot me—eh, what?"

"Yes," I agreed.

Then I hesitated. Should I tell him of the duke? Was it possible that he had not seen the afternoon papers? Evidently so, since he had not commented upon the robbery. Assuredly they had escaped his notice. And why tell the poor lovesick boy about Alicia's part in it? I had a feeling that he would be even more effective in assisting us if he did not know until we were well on our way that night. So I merely repeated my instructions and hurried from him to impart the glad tidings to my charge and then to secure my knitting, in order that I might be flaunting that badge of

[Pg 247]

XVI

[Pg 248]

My dear father used to say that the test of good breeding lay in the ability to maintain the social amenities toward some one who had wronged you. Kipling, I think it is, cites the instance of an Englishman who continued to dress for dinner alone in the jungle, as a perfect example of breeding. But then, Kipling had only the Englishman's word for it, because if he were alone when he dressed, which seems probable—indeed is so stated—how could any one have seen him? Whereas I have watched my dear father turn the other cheek to the barber who used to visit our establishment weekly, when one cheek had been badly scraped, and not utter anything stronger than an inquiry about the man's health!

And the art of behaving naturally, yet not too naturally, if you understand me, through the routine of living under trying domestic conditions, certainly appears to come more easily to persons whose traditional training has been in the line of self-restraint rather than that of self-expression; in other words, to those of aristocratic forbears. Perhaps that is why the purest aristocracy so seldom attains anything except good manners. But I digress. My intent was merely to make a passing philosophic comment upon the dinner party of three—Mr. Markheim, Mr. Pegg and myself—which was held that evening at the villa.

For though no one could deny Mr. Pegg's sterling worth there were times when his, as it were, silver needed repolishing. And this was such a time. As for Sebastian Markheim, for all his wealth, the veneer of culture, which had never been much more than tailor-deep, now showed the common clay beneath all too plainly; and the bandage which his New York physician had arranged over one eye did nothing to make his behavior more becoming. Whereas on the other hand I was my own cheery, chatty self, only more so, if possible, entertaining both gentlemen with a pleasant account of a railroad accident of which I had read that day, and an explanation of the main differences between knitting and crochet work.

[Pg 249]

However, they were not very responsive, proving conclusively my dear father's theory. In point of fact they were both so uncommunicative that it was necessary for me to exercise considerable tact and ingenuity before I could get out of them the fact that Sandro di Monteventi was still at large, though he had been traced as far as New York City.

Indeed I cannot imagine why these two gentlemen should have been suspicious of my trustworthiness, yet their reticence could have no other implication. However, when I made quite sure that no further information was to be had out of them I continued to be quite as delightful as before, even insisting upon serving their after-dinner coffee with my own hands as soon as the footman had carried it into the library for us.

I confess that my solicitation about the serving of this was not wholly disinterested, inasmuch as I administered a small dose of veronal in each cup—a mere five grains to insure their sleeping—and sleeping early. And in truth my dear father never approved the taking of coffee in the evening, and I knew that neither of these men had had sufficient sleep during the past forty-eight hours. Also, I did not wish my project to fail through any oversight on my part. Moreover, neither being a good judge of coffee, they made no comment on the flavor.

[Pg 250]

Thus it was that when, shortly after nine o'clock, first one and then the other excused himself and went off to bed, I did not seek to detain either, but remained myself in the library for half an hour, ostensibly engaged in the perusal of a volume of Carlyle's French Revolution but in reality with one eye fixed upon the clock, and my attention absorbed with waiting for the moment when I might retire to my chamber without apparent undue haste.

At length the clock struck ten, having been considerably longer than its usual time in getting round to it, or so I fancied, and I rose in a leisurely fashion, putting away my book and ringing for the footman. When he appeared I bade him a cheerful good night and told him to put out the lights. Then I made my way upstairs to Peaches, my heart beating with excitement but my head quite cool and collected as I admitted myself to our, as it were, joint prison.

I found the dear girl already dressed in a dark suit and small hat, her face still pale, though her sleep had greatly refreshed her and her eyes were once more the great fiery cat eyes of amber that I loved to watch.

"Free," she began at once, "is there any news of him? Have they caught him?"

"Not yet," I replied, "but he's in New York somewhere—at least that's what they think. Don't forget to take your toothbrush."

"And you are sure that Dicky understands what to do?"

"Of course!" I replied, going to my top bureau drawer and regarding the contents critically. "Now let me see what I shall take."

[Pg 251]

"I guess father will never forgive us," remarked Peaches dolefully. "But it seems a person never can do what they think right without getting in wrong with some one."

"I shall take my father's chronometer," I mused half aloud, "smelling salts and a pack of cards, for

solitaire. Also my small folding check book. These, together with my toothbrush and clean handkerchief, will just about fill my reticule."

I was putting these articles into their receptacle as I talked, but my attention was fixed upon Alicia's face. She looked as if she were seeing a vision; never have I beheld such an expression of anxious beatitude, if one may say so, on any human countenance either before or since. It was hardly wholesome.

"Did you put on low-heeled shoes?" I asked practically. Peaches came to with a start.

"Yes," she replied. "Free, do they let you get married in jail?"

"They send you there for getting married too often," I replied. "Now keep your mind on the excitement of the moment and hook up my shirt waist for me, there's a good girl."

"A shirt waist that hooks up the back is a blouse, Free," she replied, smiling wanly. "How am I ever going to make your sense of luxury as strong as your pocket-book?"

"This blouse by any other name was just as dear," I replied.

And so with light chaffing we made the interval of our preparation and waiting durable to each other; and at length I sat down by the opened, darkened window for the third night in succession, to listen for Richard, the chauffeur, to signal. One by one the other lights in the house were extinguished and gradually complete silence reigned over the massive pile of what had but a brief three days ago been Peaches' future home, and which we were about to forswear forever in the cause of love and spiritual freedom, not to mention actual physical freedom. At five minutes of the hour Peaches broke the silence with an impatient whisper.

[Pg 252]

"All this stage stuff is the greatest bunk!" she exclaimed under her breath. "I wish to goodness you'd open the door and let us walk downstairs like rational human beings!"

"And break a Talbot's word?" I retorted. "Never! What I promise your dear father I keep my word about."

"Freedom Talbot, I sometimes think you are stuck on pa," commented Peaches reflectively.

And then, before I was obliged to reply to this most inconsiderate comment and indefensible charge, a low whistle sounded from the garden, the old familiar whistle with which I had heard Peaches signal to Richard, the chauffeur, a thousand times. At once she was upon her feet, her body tense, her foolish remark mercifully forgotten as she responded. Three liquid notes, soft yet clear. Then silence.

"Now for it!" I whispered. "You follow me—I know the way!" And carrying my shoes in my hand I stepped forth across that window sill, which must, so I believe, bear about it the odor of romance forevermore.

I am pained to relate that the first thing Peaches did upon reaching the ground was to embrace Dick Talbot and kiss him upon both cheeks. But such is the distressing truth, inappropriate as the action was in view of the fact that she was escaping from one fiancé in order to go in search of another, and that Dick was neither of them. But he did not seem to object in the least, though the moment she freed him he very properly turned his attention to helping me on with my shoes.

[Pg 253]

"All set, Aunt Mary!" he whispered then. "This way, please, and watch your step in case the enemy sets up a barrage!"

In silence we followed him through the garden and out across the meadow, keeping in the shadow of the trees and hedges whenever possible, and trampling the brave little white crocuses underfoot. At length we reached the fence which separated the grounds from the highroad, and as it was fortunately not very high he helped us over without difficulty, the main gates at the lodge being, as he informed us, locked for the night.

Drawn close to the fence was a powerful car with the engine running softly. Richard assisted me into the rear seat and Peaches sprang up beside him in front; there was a grinding sound from the creature's innards and we slid smoothly out into the open road.

The river road from Ossining to New York is one of surpassing beauty, even at night, when the smooth winding ribbon of it is practically without traffic. But I was not much concerned with its loveliness, as the night was too dark, for one thing, to permit more than a speculation as to what lay behind the hedges and rows of trees with which it is lined, and the Hudson lay hidden in the black depth of its own valley save when a moving light or two from a nocturnal vessel betrayed its whereabouts. Overhanging clouds now threatened rain, and a mist crept up from the broad stream, obscuring the lamps and blurring the occasional lighted window by our way. At any moment I expected that, as The Duchess would say, the heaven would open to emit a torrential storm; and I wished heartily that I had worn my other hat.

[Pg 254]

Furthermore, if I had been able to see anything of the landscape as we passed I could not have focussed much attention upon it because of the terrific rate of speed at which Richard, the chauffeur, had determined to drive. At each and every curve I anticipated an accident of some sort—a collision with some unfortunate night traveler, a possibly fatal encounter with a train or trolley car. But miraculously nothing of the kind happened. I made one or two futile attempts to dissuade him from his reckless course, inasmuch as the discovery of our flight was extremely unlikely to occur for many hours to come. My words were merely blown back into my face, and solicitude for my hat and feathers at length caused me to relinquish my efforts and sit dumbly clinging to the seat with one hand and to my headgear with the other. I assume that he was driving as much from the stress of his emotions as by reason of Peaches' urging him to haste, but

I could not help reflecting, sorry as I was for the young man's hopeless passion, that love is a selfish thing—a remark which has doubtless been made by earlier writers.

I could not hear a word of what conversation was going on in the front seat, but there seemed to be little enough of it, and all of Dick's energies were obviously bent on driving—a fact for which I dumbly thanked the Almighty, and it was not until almost an hour later, when the outskirts of the city had been reached and our driver drew up at the curb before a species of nocturnal dairy, or all-night lunch, as I believe such places are called, that we had any real conversation regarding further plans.

[Pg 255]

Richard insisted that we get down from the machine and enter the humble eating establishment, whose window displayed nothing more inviting than a few dozen oranges, which my practiced eye recognized as inferior sweated Southern fruit, and a black cat, the latter sound asleep.

But once entering its tiled interior, which made me oddly uncomfortable, conveying as it did a sense of being in a most dreadfully public bathroom, the refreshing odor of coffee and hot cakes revived our more material senses, and over a generous supply of both we told Dick the whole story, beginning with the moment of our arrival in the East up to the point of the aforementioned pancakes and coffee.

While Peaches was telling him about the duke and how she loved him, young Talbot could not endure to look at her—a fact of which she appeared oblivious, so wrapped was she in her recital. And it was only when she had quite finished and was waiting for him to speak that he mastered his emotions sufficiently to look at her with his honest, suffering eyes.

"So he is alive?" he said simply. "And, of course, you have to go to him, old girl. There is something wrong with this crook idea. That man is not a crook."

"Thanks, Dicky!" said Peaches, her eyes filling as she covered his hand with hers for an instant. "I know there isn't any reason to believe in him—but I do, just the same."

"But there is a reason," said Dick unexpectedly. "Look here, Peaches, I suppose I ought to have told you this when I first came back. But I didn't first off, because I found you engaged to another man and apparently happy. I didn't want to go raking over old wounds. So I didn't even speak of him except to say that I'd heard he was killed in a gallant action—and I never even said that much until you mentioned it first—do you remember?"

[Pg 256]

"Yes," she nodded. "Go on, Dicky!"

"But I'd seen him while I was over there," he said. "I—well, it was rather by accident but I happened to save his life. Oh, not the last time! Up to to-night I thought he was dead, the same as you did. But before that. It was the time I got the Italian medal—"

"So that was why you wouldn't talk about it!" I ejaculated. But neither paid any attention to me.

"He asked a lot about you," Dicky went on. "And I told him all I could. About the ranch, and what you and Miss Freedom were doing. He was just crazy to hear. But he didn't want me to tell you about him. 'I'm not fit for her, Dick,' he says to me. We was both getting over scalp wounds then and used to sit out in front of the hut and talk a lot. 'I got out of her life for her own good,' he says. 'And if it ever comes natural tell her I didn't intend to kill the chap at the railway station—it was in self-defense.' That's what he told me. And then he tried to give me a ring he had, because of me having the luck to save him, see? But I wouldn't take it. So he give me his address in case I ever needed anything."

"His address?" said Peaches chokingly. "Why, Monteventi is his address, surely?"

"Yeh—but he give me another one besides," said Dick. "Though, of course, I heard after that he had gone West, and so I kind of forgot about it."

[Pg 257]

"If he had another address it must have been where he could be reached in an emergency!" cried Peaches. "Can't you remember it, Dicky? Oh, think! Please try to remember it!"

"I guess maybe I got it on me," said he with a curious shyness. "I—wrote it on the back of your picture. I—I carried it along through the war. I might have it now, at that."

From the inside of his coat he took a thin wallet, through which he pretended to search while we watched breathlessly. And there, as I had anticipated, was the portrait of Alicia—Alicia at sixteen with her heavy hair in braids over either shoulder and a Mexican sombrero shading her laughing eyes. He turned it over and she gave a little cry as she recognized her lover's name—followed by an address in Hoboken!

We exchanged a look of wonder.

"By gosh, I'll bet a dollar that's where he is to-night!" exclaimed Talbot. "Not a very tasty neighborhood, but just the kind of a place a bird like him would fly to for cover. And see the way I was to address him. S. M., care of Smith! He said they forwarded his mail for him. Peaches, I'll go there for you the minute I get you two girls safe at a hotel!"

"You will not!" said Peaches. "Because we are going with you."

"Oh, come—that's not right!" protested Dick. But nothing would dissuade Peaches.

"Well—we may need some money," said he, at length consenting to the mad scheme. "I've a few dollars, but eventually we'll have to get some more. Did you bring any, Peaches?"

Her face dropped in dismay.

[Pg 258]

"I never thought of it!" she gasped "And my purse was on the dressing table too!"

"Never mind!" said I, plunging my hand into my reticule. "I have brought a check book and I have a lot of money in the bank."

With which I drew out—not my check book at all, but the black leather wallet which Peaches had thrown into the pond out at the ranch, and which I had subsequently rescued.

For a moment we all gazed at it stupidly. Then Peaches recognized it and snatched it from the table.

"Sandy's wallet!" she cried. "Freedom Talbot, where did you get this thing?"

"I—I found it in the garden out at home," I stammered, blushing violently, "and I kept it in case—that is, I thought that perhaps sometime——"

"I see!" said she in a tone which led me greatly to fear that she did.

"What is it?" our escort now wanted, not unnaturally, to know.

"It's something of his—the duke's," I said. "Peaches has had it for years."

"Give us a look-see!" asked Dick, stretching out his hand for it. Rather reluctantly she allowed him to take it.

"I bet there's something sewed inside that lining!" he commented after a moment's examination. "Let's open her up!"

"No!" cried Peaches, snatching it back. "If there is it's none of our business. I'll just take care of it, thanks! And now about money—our not having any lets us out of the hotel plan, Dick; and anyhow if we cash a check we can't do it before to-morrow. In order to get into a decent hotel without any bags we'd have to prove who we are, and then pa would spot us first thing in the morning."

[Pg 259]

"Besides which, if Sandro is really at this Hoboken address, he will very likely be gone by morning," I added; "if indeed he has not already left."

"You said it!" cried Peaches. "Come on, let's go! The Lord only knows when that ex-sheriff of a parent of mine will have a posse on my trail!"

We acted upon this, the combined wisdom of all three of us, and paying our modest indebtedness to the midnight-luncheon establishment, betook ourselves back to the automobile and the pursuit of our quest.

How silent are the busy marts of Manhattan in the small hours of the night! With her pearl-like lamps the only sentinels along our way, we sped into Broadway and thence across the park and down Fifth Avenue almost as rapidly as we had proceeded along the Albany highway from Ossining, turning west at some side street evidently familiar to Richard, the chauffeur, since the days of his debarkation, and sped toward a westbound ferryboat.

It was a great comfort to me to realize that the city of Hoboken itself would not be wholly unfamiliar to him either, inasmuch as he had left for Europe from that port as a soldier, and had again visited it in the same capacity two years later upon his return. Therefore, he could, of course, be relied upon to know something about the place, and just how undesirable he considered the section for which we were headed might be. It did not, however, occur to me to question him on this point until the lights of the opposite shore were drawing near. We had remained seated in the auto, which was driven bodily upon the lower section of the ferryboat.

[Pg 260]

"Richard," I said, "do you consider the section for which we are bound a residential one?"

"I do not!" he responded promptly. "I'll say the inhabitants usually make about a week-end of it before they are invited to Sing Sing. I wish I had thought to bring a gun along!"

"If a revolver will do as well," said I, "I have one upon my person. It is that which I obtained from that gambling creature in Monte Carlo."

"Good girl, Aunt Mary!" he exclaimed. "Slip it to me, will you?"

"In order to do so I must retire to the ladies' cabin," I replied with dignity, "inasmuch as it is attached to my—my garter."

"Well, if you aren't a caution to rattlesnakes!" exclaimed he. "All right, sport, only hurry up, for we'll be landing in a few minutes now."

I alighted from the rear of the machine with all possible celerity and made my way upstairs to the higher deck and the retreat which I sought. Putting the firearm into my reticule I was about to descend when the sight of a familiar figure standing on the front deck of the vessel, his face sharply outlined against the light, arrested my action and my attention.

It was the detective named Pedro—he who had posed as night watchman at the villa—and he was standing right where he could not fail to see our car and recognize its occupants the moment we drove out to land.

It was an emergency and I steeled myself to meet it intelligently. If I were to go below at once all I could accomplish would be the warning of my companions. Still, what better course offered? None that I could see at first. Pedro had not seen me as yet, but continued to stand looking out toward the Jersey shore. And while I hesitated as to what I should do the Divine Providence which looks after lovers put a means of eluding him into my very hands, as it were.

[Pg 261]

From a door close beside me and which was marked "Private" in large letters, there at this moment emerged a man in overalls. The door swung to behind him, locking with a snap, and an

instant later he discovered that he had left something in the cabin and being in a great hurry swore shockingly as he fumbled with his keys, for he was obliged to unlock the door, which fastened with a spring lock, before he could get back into the place. The dock was very close now, and the bell was clanging loudly. In another moment we would have touched. The mechanic's haste was frantic, which, of course, caused him some further delay, but at length he succeeded in opening the door again. On the instant finding myself unobserved I slid about a quarter of my little pack of playing cards into the jamb of the door. They were just of a sufficient thickness to allow the door to shut without permitting it to lock. The mechanic having found what he wanted came out, swung the door, as he supposed, closed, and went on his way.

Hardly had he vanished down the stairs when Pedro saw me and at once approached, raising his hat with a sarcastic politeness that thinly veiled a sneer. And as he came I knew for certain that he was the man whom it had twice already been my pleasure to foil. Nevertheless, I greeted him pleasantly enough.

"Ah—good evening!" said I. "You are looking for Mr. Markheim, I suppose?"

Well, the fellow looked a good deal surprised at that, but he wouldn't admit it—not he.

[Pg 262]

"Yes, of course," said he, to draw me out.

"This is splendid!" I said heartily. "We were afraid our telegram hadn't reached you. He's just inside in this cabin. Won't you go in?"

The room lighted automatically as the door was pushed inward. He entered, I pulled out the cards and slammed the door behind him just as the clamor of our arrival at the hospitable Hoboken shores drowned out all immediate danger of his cries being heard.

But I ran down the stairs to the car like—like the very deuce, as my dear father used to say. And climbing into my place I leaned over and slipped the revolver into Dick's pocket.

"Drive like Sam Hill!" I commanded in a fierce undertone. "I've just locked Pedro into the fireman's washroom and he's not going to like it very much!"

XVII

[Pg 263]

I made this remark with a pleasant smile to give the appearance of passing a joke, in case Pedro's partner should prove to be on board and watching us. Dicky smiled back, but nevertheless acted upon my hint without delay; and as a combined result of our smiling faces the gateman grinned as well and permitted our car to debark first.

The delay on the pier, where we were obliged to proceed at a snail's pace, was a dreadful strain. Suppose that Pedro's cries were to be heard, and, rescued, he bore down upon us? I shuddered at the thought. But at length we were past officialdom and speeding up the hill and into the city's silent and deserted ways. Dicky turned his head to question me, almost colliding with a lamp-post by so doing, but his usual nonchalant skill saving us by a hair—or so it appeared to me.

"Now what the devil did you say you did?" he wanted to know.

"Pedro—the detective," I said—"I locked him up on the boat!" I repeated.

"Good heavens, Freedom! How?" cried Peaches.

I told them briefly. Richard, the chauffeur, gave a long whistle.

"Then it's more than likely we are headed right!" said he. "Gosh Almighty, Aunt Mary, I hope I never get in wrong with you!"

"Why?" I demanded. "I simply do the obvious thing as occasion arises."

"Well, give us a little advance notice when you are going to pull something out of the usual," he replied cryptically, and turned his attention back to the car—for which I felt profoundly grateful—and to scanning the corner lamps for the name of the avenue for which we were seeking.

[Pg 264]

Fortunately the streets were literally deserted and so we escaped notice. If any one had followed us from the ferry he would have been visible many blocks away. The only living creature we passed in fifty squares was a marauding cat which shot across our path like a black arrow.

"Good luck!" commented Peaches.

But the remark failed to reassure me, for by now we had discovered and turned into our avenue, and its aspect was most decidedly not residential. In point of fact it could hardly be said to contain houses, much less anything worthy of being dignified by the name of residence. It was quite unlike any part of Boston with which I was acquainted, and I did not fancy its atmosphere, which was redolent of gas, to say the least. Moreover, it was not at all a suitable place for a duke to live, even when in retirement from the police. I should have felt something on upper Fifth Avenue much more fitting—say, in a secret chamber in the neighborhood of the Plaza. Or in the half-ruinous mansion of some aristocrat out at, let us say at Hempstead, which I understand contains many fine old estates.

The quarter through which we were proceeding was impossible—simply impossible! I trust that there is very little of the snob in me, at least of that species of snob which cannot distinguish between genteel poverty and common poverty. Mere shabbiness is no cause for losing caste, as I

[Pg 265]

myself know full well. And so I would have said nothing to a shabby neighborhood. But this was not even, properly speaking, a neighborhood, being as it was, chiefly composed of gas tanks which towered heavenward in shadowy menace, of warehouses with blank faces, and unpleasant odors.

Between these at rare intervals were sandwiched little groups of houses—part of what might originally have been rather a fine terrace. Three-story brick affairs, they were, that once might have looked out upon the river before their giant neighbors had risen to obstruct the view. They stood in little groups of three or four, huddled together and squeezed on either hand by elbowing dirty lofts or other commercial tramps of buildings. Most of them appeared to be used for the storing of hides, to judge from the refuse in the street before them; some had been ruined by fire without being demolished, others gaped with broken windows behind their "For Sale" signs—drearily awaiting purchasers who never came.

But here and there among them were a few which gave indication that human beings still used them as habitations—a dirty window curtain, a set of battered shades, a stoop less cluttered than those of the neighbors. And occasionally a dingy notice that there were furnished rooms to be had. But nowhere any light. It was like a city of the dead,—or like a town long abandoned. It was difficult indeed to realize that on the morrow—nay, later on in this very morning—the place would be a busy waterfront.

It was before one of these poor houses that Richard, the chauffeur, at length came to a halt; and exceptionally moldy and uninviting specimen it was, with the storage terminal of some exporting company on the one hand of it and a string of unsavory-looking lodgings upon the other. The number for which we were looking was discernible, though scarcely legible above its closed storm doors—Number 1162. There could be no mistake. It was our destination. But it certainly did not look inviting, from cellar to attic the shutters, though sagging precariously on their hinges, were closed, and the areaway was obstructed by empty crates, evidently refuse from its business neighbor.

[Pg 266]

"It doesn't look as if a soul were home," I observed. "How very disappointing!"

"Houses that refugees are hiding in don't exactly open up like hotels," observed Dicky dryly. "The question now is, how do we get invited in without bringing a lot of attention on ourselves?"

"Well, there's no use sitting here discussing such things!" I snapped, taking out my dear father's chronometer and looking at it under the light of the nearest lamp. "It is now fifteen minutes of three o'clock. I suggest we take some action. We can't stay here, that's plain. Listen to that thunder, will you? I wish I had worn my other hat! I just knew it was going to rain!"

"We might go up and ring the bell," suggested Peaches, climbing to the sidewalk. "That hasn't failed yet, you know."

"Since we have been fools enough to come without any definite plan," agreed Dick Talbot, "I suppose we may as well act as if it were an ordinary call. But first I'm going to run the bus round the corner and park it out of sight. They'll be more apt to open up."

He left the motor running and assisted me to alight and then drove off to fulfil this plan, returning presently on foot, whereat we ascended the broken steps together, and Richard gave the old-fashioned bell knob a vigorous pull. Faintly from below came the sound of it in due time, a harsh jangle as when a bell clangs in an empty echoing room. Then he waited, but no other sound broke the stillness.

[Pg 267]

"Try again," said Peaches after several minutes had elapsed.

And there really being nothing else to do, Dicky obeyed, with no better result. Once the faint echoes of its ringing had died away within the building all was as silent as the tomb. A cat wailed suddenly from some hidden fence, causing us to start, but that was all.

"There may be some other way in," said Richard in a low voice. "Though this is certainly the right number."

"And it may be that nobody lives here too," said I dryly, "and that we have come upon a fool's errand!"

"You knew we were chancing that!" snapped Peaches. "But I won't be satisfied to go away now—let's try the lower door!"

Well, I could not see what sense there was in that, though our escort agreed. And so the two descended from the high stoop and vanished into the darkness of the areaway, amid the crates that were heaped within it, while I remained at the main entrance. The few drops of rain which had been falling when we arrived were rapidly increasing in number and force, and the thunder drew nearer and nearer with angry mutterings.

Bitterly regretting that I had ever risked my best hat upon an adventure which seemed doomed to so tame an ending I withdrew myself from the open stoop and sought what scant shelter the outer ledge of the storm door afforded, flattening myself as much as possible and hoping devoutly that my ostrich tips would recurly nicely.

[Pg 268]

From below came the sound of a bell, another bell this time, but ringing in just as desolate a way as that of the front door. Again silence except for that wretched feline. Then came the sound of approaching footsteps. Some one was coming down the street!

The steps were not very loud to be sure, the newcomer being soft shod, and after a moment I realized that Peaches and Dicky, being intent upon their immediate occupation, and furthermore,

cut off from this approach by being on the far side of the solid masonry of the high stoop, did not hear him. It flashed across my mind that policemen did not usually wear sneakers or rubber soles to their shoes, and that therefore this was not the roundsman of the beat. In confirmation of this supposition was the fact that whoever was approaching was in a hurry—not running, but coming on with a quick light step, very unlike the heavy deliberate tread of a night watchman wearing away the hours at his post.

Therefore I very cautiously stuck my head round the corner, only to withdraw it instantly and remain motionless, soundless, against the door. It was a man who was approaching, his arms filled with bundles such as would indicate a visit to some all-night grocery or, more likely, delicatessen store; and his enormous height made him unmistakable. It was Sandro.

All unknowing what awaited him, he ran lightly up the steps, glancing up and down the street as he did so. And as he reached the top step I fell upon him from the shadow, throwing both my arms round his neck and causing him to spill a half dozen oranges, which bounded down into the street and areaway—one of them, I later learned, striking Richard upon the head and thus giving him notice that he was wanted.

[Pg 269]

"Sandro!" I cried. "Thank goodness you came home—my hat would have been ruined in another five minutes!"

"Good Lord! Miss Talbot!" he stammered, making a futile effort to free himself of me.

But I hung on like a leech. I feared that if I relaxed my embrace for an instant he would make a dash for liberty.

"Oh, but I'm glad to see you!" I said. "Fear not, we know all, but are still your friends."

By that time Peaches and Dicky were with us. Seeing this I let him go, and for a moment he stood there looking dazedly from one to the other, a side of bacon sticking grotesquely out from under one arm, a bottle of milk held firmly in the other hand.

"Alicia!" he murmured, scarcely able to believe his eyes. "I don't understand. And Dick—"

"Neither do we quite get it," responded Dick cheerfully. "That's why we are here. Just hand over the eats, old man, and let us into this palace of yours, where we can chin a little less conspicuously! Hurry now, before some unwelcome party tries to join us!"

Spurred into a sort of hypnotic life the duke obeyed, finding a key and entering first. Peaches went next, slipping her hand through his arm as she went; and hastily picking up two of the oranges and a loaf of bread, which fortunately was nicely wrapped in glazed paper, I followed them, Dicky bringing up the rear and closing the door behind us.

[Pg 270]

Then the duke turned on a light, after a brief interval which can only be explained by—well, it was probably Peaches' fault. At any rate he turned on a light, which disclosed a shabby, threadbare hallway, and then opening the door at his right indicated that we should enter.

Now it was one of my dear father's iron-bound rules that no well-bred person ever evinces surprise at his surroundings; but it is my firm conviction that even he would have excused the exclamation which burst from my lips upon entering that apartment; in point of fact it is quite possible to conceive of his joining with me in expressing astonishment. For far from being the sordid den which I had been prepared to see, it was a room of such luxury as I have seldom beheld. The furniture was fit to grace a museum, the rugs were priceless, while on the wall hung several fine paintings, among which I was horrified to recognize the Florentine Madonna and Rubens' Venus and Mars. There were other art treasures too—carvings, candelabra and goodness only knows what not. At the moment my interest focused so sharply upon the central figures in the drama that I was unable to register more than a chaotic impression of immense wealth. The museums of Europe might well have envied that collection.

The duke turned quietly to Peaches.

"Alicia!" he said. "Now tell me—I don't understand why you have come. It cannot be to betray me."

"Sandro!" she cried. "It is I who don't understand. You can't be a common thief! And if you are, I don't care. You—you may get over it. And I came because I love you. Do I have to tell you that? I'm never going away from you again!"

[Pg 271]

The duke turned very white and backed away from her.

"Look here!" he said. "I can't let you do this, you know. I've run away from you once—don't make it impossible, Alicia!"

"But I have loved you right along," she persisted. "We heard that you were dead—and so I thought I might as well marry Mark, you know—because nothing seemed to matter. Oh, don't send me away! Look—I have carried your wallet all these years."

Well, of course, Peaches exaggerated a little when she said that, but it was no time for correcting her statement. And anyhow the duke didn't seem to care. With a swift gesture he took it from her.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked, looking into her eyes. "No? And still you believe in me!"

"I knew there was something in it!" exclaimed Richard, the chauffeur. And he was right. There was. To think that I could have overlooked such a fact!

Hurriedly the duke took out his penknife, ripped the edges apart, and from the interlining took

out a thin packet wrapped in waterproof tissue. And I had felt that pad and thought it was mere stuffing! With skillful—too skillful—fingers he unfolded the covering, and opening up the paper it contained he spread it upon the table for us all to see.

"Look!" he said. "I want you to understand what this is before we go any further. This bit of paper is a *carte blanche* from—from a very important person in Italy. See, his signature."

We looked—and though I was the only one of the three that could read Italian the two others were scarcely less impressed than I was. For the duke had spoken truly.

[Pg 272]

"*Carte blanche*," said Peaches. "That means 'free hand', doesn't it? But how does that square you, Sandy dear?"

"It doesn't, really," said he. "But if you'll all sit down I'll tell you just where it comes in. It's rather a long story," he added. "And my boat sails at eight o'clock."

As if in a dream we did as he suggested. The duke himself stood before the open hearth, his hands clasped behind his back, his head bent in silence for a moment. Then he raised it as if shaking off some evil dream and began his extraordinary story.

"In the eyes of the world I am a thief," he pronounced. "In all probability the greatest thief of our day, and what is more, the most discriminating one. You see how my taste seems to run—world-renowned paintings of almost inestimable value, rare carvings, tapestries and statues. Clumsy to handle, are they not? Frightfully difficult to dispose of. But that is not the strangest part of my predications. You will notice that all of them are of the art of a single nation—Italy."

"Well," he went on, "strange as these two facts may appear, there is a stranger one still. Nothing that I take is ever missed. I make one exception to that—the Scarpia panels. I bungled that badly. And then last night—if it had not been for Markheim's brutality to you"—here Sandro's face grew livid at the recollection—"if it had not been for that interruption, when I remembered that I had left your little knife on the frame and returned to get it because I could not endure to leave behind the only souvenir I had of you—I would have got away clear. You people would have gone on living with that replica, boasting of it, perhaps, to the end of your lives, and then handing it down to posterity as a treasure of the highest order. I can assure you that there is more than one great collector in whose service I have been, or in whose house I have visited as a guest, who is doing that very thing."

[Pg 273]

"But, Sandro!" cried Peaches. "What did you do it for? You couldn't sell such things? Where are they? Or are these some of them?"

She indicated the contents of the room with a sweeping gesture.

"These are my weapons," he said, smiling. "Replicas, all of them, to be used as the occasion rises; as I locate some treasure and plan to acquire it."

"But do you sell them?" she persisted.

"No," said he.

"Then you keep them? You take them for yourself?" she cried incredulously.

"I haven't got one of them!" he declared, "except the Madonna of the Lamp. And I'll not have her long."

"But do you mean to say you use a fence?" Dicky broke in.

"I do not," replied Sandro. "Every one of these paintings that I have recovered is in the hands of the Italian Government—where they all both morally and legally belong!"

His voice had taken on a new tone and we looked at each other in astonishment.

"Then this paper——" began Peaches.

"Was for an extreme emergency only," replied Sandro. "I have never had occasion to use it before. But to-night I may need to, because I'm going to give up my job. If the police come I shall let them in. I can't go on any longer because of—you!"

[Pg 274]

She went to him then, and we turned our heads away. It was later, when, still uninterrupted by the police, we were enjoying a breakfast of the groceries which the duke had brought in, that we learned the rest of the tale.

It seems that both Sandro and his brother, Leonardo, had a passion for art, a natural inheritance from their father. And indignant at the spoliation of Italy by wealthy foreigners they had determined to recover for Italy every object of art upon which they could lay their hands that had been illegally smuggled out of the country, by unscrupulous foreign capitalists.

"I was the more adept," said Sandro, "and so my brother has for years acted merely as a sort of curator for the originals until means could be found to place them on public view again. He has them at Monteventi, where he has lived a very retired life by preference. He is a sort of hermit at best, and it was at his desire that I assumed the title.

"At first the whole scheme seemed nothing but a lark. I was wonderfully successful and I cannot, I do not now believe that I have done anything but right in recovering these treasures from those thieves! I was deeply involved in a mesh of appearances when I met you, Alicia. It was too late to clear my heels without taking the International Secret Service into my confidence. That I felt I could not do; I had dedicated my life to the job, you see, and so I ran away from you. Then the war came. When I met Dick and heard of you I thought you had forgotten—as you ought! Peaches, I am a miserable adventurer—I haven't a penny in the world beyond a tiny income

[Pg 275]

which my brother shares and which we have existed on all these years. You see, my robberies have never netted me a shilling."

"I should worry!" Peaches remarked.

"You ought to!" he admonished her. "Good Lord, when I found you were going to be married——"

"And so I am going to be!" declared Peaches. "Sandro, you are a Dago nut, but I get you perfectly. And I'm going to keep you this time. If you will promise to get a more usual job I don't care how poor we are, only if it's all the same to you I would like to get married right after we wash these dishes. Pa may be closing in on us, and I'd like to have matters cinched before he arrives on the scene."

"Great Scott!" said Sandro. "Do you mean it?"

"I said it!" replied Peaches. "Please, Sandy, don't make me ask you twice!"

"But your poor father will be furious!" I protested. "And you'll have no bridesmaids or anything else!"

"Well, I don't know just how the law will act about your other affairs when the truth comes out," commented Dicky, "but I will say that Pa Pegg will have a hard time prying the wife of an Italian subject away from him."

"Will I stop being an American when I marry you, Sandy?" cried Peaches, showing the first extreme symptoms of excitement which she had evidenced as yet.

"Yes. But not for long!" he replied. "I want to come back to this, my mother's country—and stay. And when I am a citizen you'll be one again, you know!"

And so it was that it turned out to be a good thing that I had worn my best hat, after all. Because I had never been a bridesmaid before, and the feathers hadn't come out of curl after all. In point of fact the curl stayed in remarkably. I even noticed it after the steamer bearing the bride and groom had sailed and I went to the newspapers to insert the official notice of the wedding. There was a little mirror over the window and I noticed particularly.

[Pg 276]

And when this social duty was done I made Dicky Talbot drive me right to a hotel and sent for Mr. Pegg. I was fearfully afraid, and so was Dicky, bless the dear boy's heart. But he went, as was his duty; and I waited, as was mine. No one can ever say a Talbot was a coward!

XVIII

[Pg 277]

It was almost two months later before the traditional bravery of my family was really put to a supreme test, however. All that had gone before—the terrible publicity which followed upon Peaches' elopement, the escape with her husband to foreign shores and his official "pardon," the international complications which this involved and my own public identification with the whole affair—was as nothing to face when compared with the emotion which assailed me upon that late June day when I stood alone upon the threshold of my father's house in Boston, and rang the newly polished door bell.

True, I had lived much in the past six and one half years, and might justly consider myself ripe in the experience gleaned therefrom. Without doubt my worldly knowledge was far beyond that of my elder sister, and yet nothing in my entire career caused me to experience such memories or cost me such effort as did the ringing of that bell.

Not that there was anything in the least alarming about the aspect of Chestnut Street itself. Quite to the contrary, its neat brick houses with their scoured limestone steps and carefully trimmed window boxes were peculiarly restful to the eye, to the spirit. The sheltering elm trees were in their finest plumage of delicate green, the destroying beetle being still at bay. The feather brick of the sidewalk was warmly colorful and quaint, and a flock of grackles foraged noisily in the gutter. It was indeed a street of peaceful beauty—unchanged after all this stormy interlude of the great war and the first turbulent months of reconstruction. All was as I had left it. Only I was changed.

[Pg 278]

And yet not so changed but that I felt the old childish fear of outraged authority upon me as I found myself about to face my sister Euphemia. The essence of her chaste personality seemed to rush out at me like a cooling wind to chill the ardor of my greeting even before I made my presence known—before I was even sure that she was at home.

For I had sent no word of my coming, wishing to take her unaware, and so surprise her perchance into some expression of warmth. Of course her ignoring of my letters and gifts was not exactly what might be called a hopeful sign. And still, hope I did, the while I feared. But after all she could do no more than turn me out, and it had been my duty to come. At any rate she could not deny this, and so at length gathering my forces in a mighty effort and determining to try to be strong in my consciousness of right, and not allow her to get the better of me the way she always used to in the old days, I finally rang the bell.

My heart pounded audibly as I did so, though I scarcely know just what I expected would happen when the door opened. Goodness knows I had time enough to calm down before it did—and during the wait I had ample opportunity for observing the changes which had been made in the home of my father.

It had been newly painted, for one thing, and the rotting column of the porch which had so long distressed Euphemia had been replaced by a sound one. Moreover, the stable was in repair, and, if I could credit my senses, in use. The patch of lawn was neat and trim, and the glimpse which I got of the garden betrayed the hand of a hired man—a first-class hired man. In the parlor windows hung new lace curtains of a most elegant design. Altogether the effect was at once prosperous and dignified, and glad tears came into my eyes as I realized that this was the fruit of my labors! For this, the substantial restoration of the house which had been my dear father's pride and joy but undoubtedly rather jerry-built in the beginning, had been restored to its pristine glory by the labor of my—well, by my labor!

[Pg 279]

What a beautiful thought! How it exalted me! And dear Euphemia had a comfortable and aristocratic though virginal old age to look forward to here in a house which was henceforth to be her very own, secured in it through my bounty. What an exquisite appreciation of the virtue of generosity was mine at that moment! How glad I was that she wouldn't have a single thing to say to me for which I would not have a mighty tangible comeback!

And then just as I had reached this high peak of enthusiastic pleasure in the rewarding power of good deeds—especially good deeds that cost only a small portion of a handsome income—just at this point in my reflections I heard a slow footstep making laggard response to my ringing, and at once my heart sank into my walkrite shoes—for I would not have dared appear in French heels—and my hands trembled in their silk gloves. Was it Euphemia herself coming to admit the wanderer? Had she grown so feeble in six and one half years that her step was slow and halting? I feared to look as the door slowly opened. Yet look I must and did.

It was an enormous colored woman.

"Yass, Ise coming," she was beginning, when suddenly she recognized me, and her broad face lighted in a grin which extended from ear to ear.

[Pg 280]

"Lordy, if it ain't Miss Free!" she cried. "Ain't changed nothin' a-tall! My lawsy—where you-all come from, Miss Free?"

"I'm just from the train," I replied, stepping gingerly into the hall. "Surely you are not Galadia?"

"I sho' am!" she said. "You didn' spek I wuz gwine be a pickaninny no mo', did you, Miss Free?"

Of course this was exactly what I had expected—a pickaninny,—fourteen-year-old Galadia, short dress, long apron and all. Indeed not to find her so was a distinct shock.

"I'm afraid I did," I admitted truthfully.

"Well, bless yo' heart, Ise got fo' pickaninnies of ma own!" she exclaimed amazingly. "Three triplets and one single!"

"Galadia!" I exclaimed. "And you are still working here. Why didn't you write me you had married!"

"Well, dat no-count nigger what Ah married wiv—he spen' so much time in de jail Ah reckoned Ah couldn't afford to lose all dem handsome single wages you done been sendin' me."

"I see!" I replied. "And now tell me—is my sister at home?"

"Ain't home yet!" she said. "Reckon you didn't tell her you was comin'? No! Well, jes' yo' set in de parlor an I fotch you a nice cup tea!"

Despite my protest the good soul hustled off to attend to my imaginary wants, and I stood looking about me dazedly. The change in the interior of the house was even greater than the external alterations, and not nearly so pleasing.

The quaint old wallpapers were gone, and in their place were cartridge papers—new and drab. This was bad enough, but when I caught sight of mission furniture in gray oak, and a player-piano encumbering our erstwhile rosewood drawing-room, my blood turned cold with horror. It was all new, all expensive, frightfully snappy, if I may borrow the term, and too, too perfectly dreadful! If this had been done to my mother's parlor what had become of the rest of the house? I trembled to think! But before I had opportunity to explore further the noise of a high-powered car stopping at the curb outside the door distracted my attention.

[Pg 281]

Through the lace of the new curtains I could see a slim woman in some sort of uniform, as she dismounted from the driver's seat. The car was one of those low-hung, long-chassised affairs with tool box and tires on the running board, solid wheels, no top and no windshield—a tremendously sporty affair. The chauffeuress wore heavy dust goggles and thick gloves, and over the smart uniform, the skirt of which did not quite cover her knees, a linen duster was worn rakishly.

Whistling a little tune of the type popularly known as jazz she shut off the motor and came up the front steps, letting herself in with a latchkey. By this time I was fairly overcome with curiosity as to who this young house guest of my sister's might be, and to my great delight she came directly into the drawing-room. When she caught sight of me she stopped dead in her tracks.

"Good Lord! Freedom Talbot!" she exclaimed. Then she removed the goggles with one hand and held out the other like a frank boy.

"Glad to see you, old thing!" she said heartily.

[Pg 282]

It was Euphemia!

Somehow or other I tottered to a chair and sank into it, calling feebly for "Water! Water!"

"Water! Stuff and nonsense!" said Euphemia. "A little brandy is what you need! Here you are!"

She held something to my lips and gratefully, but expecting at any moment to awaken from my dream, I drank.

"I carry it in my emergency kit," Euphemia was explaining. "Need it sometimes in my work with the boys!"

"With the boys?" I asked feebly.

If she had forthwith produced, like Galadia, a set of triplets and a single, I should not have been more astonished. In point of fact I was not capable of further astonishment because she had already taken all the astonishment I had.

"Oh! I forgot. You wouldn't know, of course!" she said briskly. "Reconstruction work. I'm on the ambulance—take 'em out for a ride from the hospital and all that. Well, how are you now? Better?"

"I'm as much better as I ever shall be after seeing you in the costume, Euphemia!" I said severely. "I'm surprised at you, I really am!"

"You have nothing on me!" she retorted. "I'm as surprised at you as you could possibly be at me. Look at the opportunities you have had—look at the places you have been—the money you have earned—and then look at the clothes you have on!"

"What is the matter with my clothes?" I gasped, outraged at her. But laughingly Euphemia got to her feet and coming over to me lifted my reticule.

"Same old bag!" she said. "Full of junk, I suppose! Same old dress—actually the same one, I do believe! And that curled fringe. Really, my dear, at your age they are ridiculous!" [Pg 283]

"At my age!" I fairly squeaked with indignation.

"Yes—you are far too young for them!" she went on calmly. "As for those gloves and those shoes! Really, Free, it's too much! I don't understand it, really!"

This was more than human nature could endure. Either her brain had gone or mine had. My clothes, of course, were in many ways a concession to the feelings of the Euphemia I had left behind me. This new creature with her carefully massaged old face, her upright figure, her perfect hearing, was a stranger to me; but a rather splendid, competent stranger, I was forced to admit.

"Euphy!" I cried in despair. "Will you not confide in me what has come over you? What has effected this amazing transformation? You owe me some explanation! I—I don't know what to think!"

She regarded me with a look that was suddenly more serious.

"I suppose it all does seem a bit queer to you," she conceded, throwing herself into one of the hideous new chairs with a boyish abandon. "I've got used to myself, you see, and I forget. I've been so frightfully busy all through the war too. I suppose the war and being in the motor corps rather waked me up a bit. The war and Uncle Joshua's money."

"Uncle Joshua!" I exclaimed. "I didn't know we had an Uncle Joshua!"

"Well, we had, and he left me all his fortune unconditionally, about two weeks after you left home," said Euphemia. "I never wrote you, because—well, your showing all that grit, going off your own bat and all, made me frightfully jealous. Made me feel so useless. And I determined I'd make something out of myself before I got too old. And, old dear, with the masseuse I've got and the good time I'm having, I expect to live to be a hundred. You see I went to a course of lectures the first month you were away. On subconscious inhibitions and suppressed desires, they were. I bought the ticket with the first of Uncle Joshua's money. I found out at these lectures that all I had to do to be a success was to be myself. I at once started in to be myself—and—here I am!" [Pg 284]

"And I slaved like a—a prisoner!" I sniffed, "and sent you money to squander in this—this outrageous life you are leading!"

"There is nothing in the least outrageous about my life!" she snapped with some of her old-time asperity. "It's far less outrageous than my old, selfish, self-centered life was. Anybody but an old-fashioned woman like yourself would see that. And as for your money, every cent of it has been spent upon the maintenance of a motor-ambulance corps—in France, during the war, and here in Boston in reconstruction since!"

"It must be admitted that I find the news very gratifying," I said after a short silence. "I am sorry I was so short. But I am upset—fearfully upset. I suppose—indeed I believe that you are living as you think right. From my standpoint I think it most unwomanly. However, I want to be friends. I wish to make this visit a success. I have some other shoes, Euphemia, really I have—quite high-heeled ones. And I only keep to my curls because Mr. Pegg, my husband, admires them!"

That fixed her! I noted with satisfaction the look of blank amazement which spread over her face. [Pg 285]

"Yes, my dear!" I said. "Your masculine ways may be all very well for you. But they will never catch you a husband. For my part, nothing could appear sweeter than to go gradually down life's sunset path hand-in-hand with a beloved partner as I am doing—and the fact that the five-carat

stone on the left one is a real diamond does not make me any the less happy!" Here I withdrew my despised silk gloves and displayed the beautiful solitaire which Mr. Markheim had given to Peaches and which my dear husband had taken off the banker's hands at cost.

"And we are going to live in golden California," I went on. "Of course the East is all very well once in a while for a change, but for living give me the West. You ought to see California, Euphemia. No rain, no snow, no bad roads, no labor troubles and no high cost of living! And the delight of all the flowers you want—such blossoms—blossoms as you have never even dreamed of, all with hardly any cultivation! Such beaches, Euphemia! Such lovely houses! We never have to heat them in the winter, except occasionally, you know."

"Perhaps I'll motor out some day!" murmured Euphemia, plainly awed.

"Oh, do!" I cried. "Gasoline is only nineteen cents in California. We grow our own, you know!"

"Must be pretty nice!" said my sister, now almost thoroughly cowed. I've noticed that is usually the effect it has upon the listener when they get me started about the Coast.

"Oh, you'd love it!" I went on enthusiastically. "You know you Easterners never see the real California fruit. It's so much larger and finer than that which you get. Of course there is only about enough of it for home consumption, so we eat it ourselves. We couldn't supply the demand it would create. The California farmer, my dear, is the only farmer in the world who consumes his own best products. And the life is so varied—boating, swimming, fishing, hunting, tennis, tobogganing at Truckee in the winter! Everything!"

"And so you are going to live on a ranch and become a regular—er—vegetable!" exclaimed Euphemia, apparently unable to think of anything more contemptuous.

"Well, Mr. Pegg says I am pretty wild stock," I admitted, blushing, "but he hopes that by cultivating me he can tame me. And I'm sure I hope he will!"

THE END

[Pg 286]

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