

The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Erratic Flame, by Ysabel De Teresa

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: The Erratic Flame

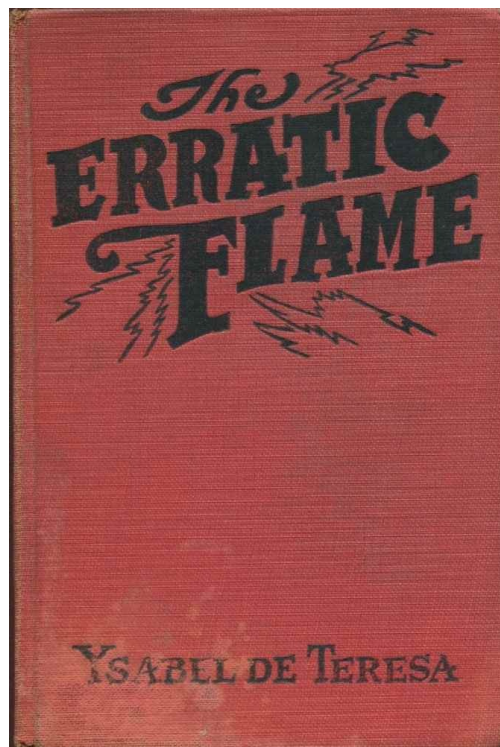
Author: Ysabel De Teresa

Release date: May 31, 2014 [EBook #45842]

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ERRATIC FLAME ***

E-text prepared by Roger Frank
and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team
(<http://www.pgdp.net>)



THE ERRATIC FLAME

BY

Ysabel de Teresa

NEW YORK
THE MACAULAY COMPANY

Copyright, 1926, by The Macaulay Company

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CONTENTS

- I [THE SCORCHING LIMELIGHT](#)
- II [ESCAPADE](#)
- III [LIFE'S GLAMOUR](#)
- IV [THE PAWN](#)
- V [CLAIRE'S RENUNCIATION](#)
- VI [DARK DESPAIR](#)
- VII [THE LOST GIRL](#)
- VIII [MORTAL SIN](#)
- IX [YOUTH'S TEMPEST](#)
- X [MERRY-GO-ROUND](#)
- XI [ANNE'S VIGIL](#)
- XII [THE HEALING VISION](#)
- XIII [BALM](#)
- XIV [RAPTURE](#)
- XV ["DUG DEEP INTO MY HEART—"](#)
- XVI [IRREVOCABLE](#)
- XVII [STRANGE AND SINISTER](#)
- XVIII [DISCORD](#)
- XIX [A CRESCENDO](#)
- XX [OFFERINGS TO THE GOD OF GENIUS](#)
- XXI [TRIUMPH](#)
- XXII [ANTI-CLIMAX](#)
- XXIII [DISSONANCE](#)
- XXIV [TRICKERY](#)
- XXV [SACRIFICIAL](#)
- XXVI ["WILL YOU TAKE ME—"](#)
- XXVII [CLAIRE'S CHILD](#)
- XXVIII ["PITY THAT PAINS"](#)
- [EPILOGUE: PURPLE AND GOLD](#)

THE ERRATIC FLAME

CHAPTER I

THE SCORCHING LIMELIGHT

As the mountain mist, caressing and desultory, resolved into a steady downpour, Anne glimpsed just above her the outlines of a hut. Crouched behind sodden boughs, decrepit, ramshackle, it tottered upon the lip of the ravine. With an amused sense of relief she trudged up towards it, her feet sinking amongst a welter of brown leaves, her whole being cleansed within the gray mantle of the rain. After a hectic summer of bridge and dancing this solitude of dripping trees and drenched leaves, fell upon her bruised spirit like a benediction. Anne thanked her very modern and somewhat pagan gods for having inspired her to escape from the inglorious rut. To-day, the New York season ahead of her, shone meretricious in the face of the crystal cleanliness of bathing woods. Perhaps she would give it all up and open the villa in Florence immediately instead of waiting until after Christmas. The very thought rested her. She attained the top of the ravine with renewed serenity.

Its gaunt outlines blurred by rain, the hut stood before her. Assailed by a feeling of almost girlish excitement she smiled with inward amusement. Surfeited, world-weary, surely she was not foolish enough to expect a thrill lurking within the walls of a dilapidated mountain cabin?

The careless little smile on her lips, she stepped upon the crazy porch and tried the door. Obstinate in mood it resisted her onslaught with almost personal violence. But she braced her back upon its gray stubbornness, and giving a vigorous push, burst into the room.

Dim, inhospitable, alien, its opaque shadows menaced vaguely. Still smiling, Anne ventured boldly forward. Then, as her eyes fell upon the hearth, hesitated, for from the embers rose a nebulous tube of smoke. Its faint, acrid tang rode the stale air challengingly. Anne darted a keen glance about her, focusing upon the extreme corner of the room where a denser blackness prevailed, which as she approached resolved itself into a couch and a mass of tossed blankets from which emerged a head; a tumbled, lolling head, which drooped towards the floor as if in pursuit of its own heavy, trailing hand. Pathetic, remote behind closed lids, it carried to Anne a summons both tragic and impelling.

She drew nearer and peered down into the pallid features. It was the face of a dissipated young god, glistening with a pallor of unhealth, beautiful in its decadence, with the pagan beauty of a Praxiteles.

A wave of pity and excitement surged over her. A boy, ill and alone; a boy with the face of a fallen Lucifer! She leaned over and placed her hand upon the pale forehead. It was cold and moist beneath a tangle of tumbled curls. She shivered slightly at the contact.

Ephemeral as was her touch, the leaden lids rose beneath it, and she found herself gazing down into a pair of weary, indifferent young eyes. She backed away hastily.

The boy intercepted her recoil with a harsh laugh. Sitting up, he clasped his head, and gazed at her from under long and pallid fingers.

"Did you think I was dead?" he said with a mocking air. "And what would you have done if I had been?" He shot her a look of impish hostility.

Anne assumed an air of indifference.

"There would have been a lot of red tape, I suppose," she said curtly over her shoulder. She turned and walked slowly toward the door.

Arms clasped about his knees, he looked after her with dawning interest.

"Where are you going?" he said brusquely. "You can't leave now in this rain." He looked up at the roof against which rushing waters beat a thunderous tattoo. Scrambling to his feet, he started towards her.

She met the haggard young eyes with composure.

"When I came in here, I thought the place was deserted," she said simply, "and then, when I saw you—"

"You thought I was dead!" he interposed with a repetition of the short, dry laugh. "No such luck!" He checked himself. "Seriously, you won't be so foolish as to go out again until the rain stops, will you? Just because you find me offensive? I'll make up the fire, and you must dry yourself."

As he said this, a sudden child-like smile lighted up the somber face. Anne decided it would be ridiculous not to stay. After all, the young brute could not eat her. It was only a few weeks since she had recovered from summer flu and she shrank from inviting another attack of the insidious enemy. Besides, in spite or perhaps because of his haggard young impudence, there welled up from her subconscious a primitive desire to see the adventure to the finish. And as she watched the slight figure busying itself at the hearth, she was smitten with a vague sense of familiarity. Where had she seen that pale face, those uptilted, faunlike eyebrows? That classic throat, which rose columnar from the *négligée* shirt? And above all, those hands, those square, elongated fingers? In some ancient bronze or marble?

She took the chair nearest the hearth and stretching her hands to the blaze, watched his impassive features as the firelight played upon them.

"That's right," he said non-committally, "better take off your sweater, it's dripping. I'll lend you one in the meanwhile."

With a quick gesture, he lighted the lamp upon the table, and opening a drawer in the ramshackle bureau, drew out a heavy wool sweater, and with a casual gesture, threw it about her shoulders.

"What a beauty!" She met his indifference with an amused smile as she caressed the smooth texture.

The eyes beneath the heavy lids mocked her. She realized with amused dismay that he evidently thought she was trying to flirt with him.

"I'm going to make tea," he said abruptly. "All women like tea." His voice was contemptuous.

The callow brutality roused her sense of humor. She removed her hat and ran her hands through hair which glistened like burnished chestnuts in the firelight. She smiled as she caught his eyes resting upon it unwillingly.

"What have women done to you?" she inquired softly.

He gave her a quick, menacing look.

"You are tyrants, all of you," he sneered savagely. "Greedy for everything. For money, flattery, love, especially love. Insatiable! Demanding, always demanding but—I promised you tea, I believe." He finished somewhat lamely, and striding to the cupboard produced a tin, a loaf of bread and some butter.

She looked at him from beneath inscrutable lashes.

"I'm sorry you're unhappy," she said simply.

"We are all unhappy," he evaded. He poured water into the dingy kettle hanging over the fire. "You are unhappy because you are wet, and like a civilized lady want your tea. I am unhappy because my head aches most damnably! For me there is no help but time, but for you there is orange pekoe."

She laughed.

"For a soulless creature like a woman there is always food, eh?" she teased. "But a masculine intellect demands only spiritual sustenance?"

He laughed more naturally, as he met her mocking glance. "I must seem an awful fool to you," he said somewhat sheepishly.

She shook her head, still smiling.

"Oh, no, I was merely thinking what a mixture of sullen boy and embittered cynic you are. Do you know you are a very odd person, indeed?"

He looked at once flattered and woebegone.

"I suppose it's this damned forcing-house I've lived in." He muttered as he sliced the bread rather clumsily, with his most unclumsy-looking hands. "Limelight doesn't mellow, it scorches!" Then as he met her astonished gaze, he checked himself abruptly. "Bread and butter and cigarettes are all I can offer, unless the storm has whetted you sufficiently for bacon and eggs?"

She laughed a denial, and springing up, lifted the chuckling kettle off the hearth. The boy hurried to her assistance and their flesh met over the handle.

"So you're a celebrity?" she thrust at him, as he took the kettle from her and placed it on a table. Beneath her scrutiny his features again became a mask, except for the eyes, which gleamed liquid in the firelight.

"You flatter me," he laughed with forced lightness. "Must I decrease my importance and the romance of the occasion by revealing my humble identity?"

"No indeed!" exclaimed Anne, "that would spoil everything."

But the odd little speech about the limelight had challenged her curiosity, and as she continued to observe him, that strange sense of familiarity which the first impression of his face had given, insinuated itself into her consciousness more securely.

"No," she murmured without an appreciable pause. "Let's just be two stray cats crawling into shelter from the rain."

An expression of relief thawed his frozen young face.

"But the Persian must not be shocked if the alley-cat does not know how to behave and laps up his milk rudely." He laughed as he poured out her tea, and handed her the bread and butter. For the moment he looked almost happy, altogether boyish. He seated himself on the other side of the table, and gazed into the fire, which crackled up into their faces with the officiousness of an elderly chaperon. Its self-conscious sputter neutralized the clamor of the rain and somehow pleased him.

"How elemental," he threw out his hands in an expressive gesture. "A storm, a fire, and a cave," he looked about the shadowy room whimsically. "A man and a woman—food—. We might be in the Stone Age." His cynical gaze probed her.

Anne's laugh was a rippling murmur.

"A moment ago we were cats. Our evolution has been rapid!"

She pushed aside her chair, rose, and walking quickly to the window, peered through the crooked panes, at the dusky woods beyond.

"The rain is letting up," she announced briefly. "I must go home, or Regina will worry herself into a fever."

His somber laugh rang harshly. "So you prefer cats to cavemen?" He joined her in a couple of lazy strides. "That isn't at all up to date! May I inquire who is Regina, and still preserve our charming incognito?"

"She is my Italian maid. We are alone here this fall and she will be wild if I don't hurry. She has been with me since I was a child and I'm scarcely allowed to breathe without her permission," she replied rather more expansively than she had intended.

"Well, if you must!" he shrugged. "I suppose I ought to say something romantic about 'ships that pass in the night,' etc. But as I am a misogynist"—he hesitated, looking at her with a sarcastic smile.

She took him up gaily.

"You merely hand me my hat, and tell me I look old enough to take care of myself!" She drew the flabby object down over her head, and met his smouldering gaze with a smile.

"You're really not so glad to have me go as you pretend," she challenged. Then she caught her breath, for he had thrown out his arms with a savage look, and for a moment she thought he was going to crush her within them. But, letting them drop abruptly, he turned, and pulling his mackintosh off the wall, thrust it about her shoulders.

"Let's go, since you wish it," he said shortly.

A moment later they were stumbling down the mountainside. Almost obliterated by rain the path had become precipitous. Masses of dead leaves choked their progress. At every step they slid and waded, ankle-deep in scaly moisture, until Anne wanted to scream at the reptilian contact.

"There's something corpse-like about them," she said, as she stumbled along behind the blinding rays of the lantern.

"Why not? That's exactly what they are," he replied grimly. He held aside a sodden branch for her to pass under. "Corpses, heaped victims of the storm, as dead as you and I shall be some day, as dead as I wish I were myself this moment!" He laughed harshly. Then as her hand touched his arm, added more gently, "Surely, you are not afraid of death."

"No, of course not." She huddled more closely to his side, "Only you're so young it seems a shame —"

He interrupted her savagely.

"All the better! Life is sufficiently drab without having to pass through the horrors of decrepitude and senility. Death is the only apology the gods can offer, for having thrust us into it."

As he spoke they emerged from the dripping woods on to the road, and the walking became easier.

"Don't you want to get somewhere, to do something worthwhile before you die?" she asked looking pityingly into the young face so white and set in the lantern rays.

His lips curled.

"Get somewhere! Do something! That is meaningless jargon. There is really no goal, no destination. We merely fool ourselves into thinking there is. Work is only a drug, a means of forgetting. A good drug, I admit, and at times even heady, but a drug, nevertheless!"

Her hold upon his arm tightened.

"Oh, how unhappy you must be! How sorry I am for you!" she cried with unmistakable sincerity. "Do tell me what is the matter. I am sure I could help you. You're so young, you probably exaggerate." She caught herself up for fear of wounding him. "I mean I'm older than you."

She held her hand out pleadingly towards him.

He clasped it in his long fingers.

"Thank you," he replied more quietly, "I believe you mean it, but I cannot, indeed I cannot!"

She did not urge, and they walked on in silence. The rain had stopped so gradually, that neither of them remembered when it had ceased to fall. Presently, they turned a bend in the road and came upon lights close at hand.

"Here's my cottage," said Anne, in a slightly surprised tone. "I didn't know we were so near. Come in and Regina will get us some supper. Then you can rest awhile before returning home."

One foot on the step, he looked up at her, as she stood on the porch above him.

"No, the play is over, the lights are out. I must return to my hut and—" beneath his breath—"my devils."

Although he had already turned about, Anne heard.

"Your devils can get along perfectly well without you. Besides I have one myself. Let us share them together. Come, I see we need each other badly tonight."

Compassionate beneath her light manner, she caught him by the back of the coat with both hands, and pulled him forcibly about. "Besides, I have your mackintosh and your sweater. You mustn't be so reckless with your property."

He followed her up the steps with obvious reluctance. She opened the door and drew him in through the glowing aperture.

"See, there's a fire," she cried gaily. "And after supper I'll play to you." She pointed to an upright in the corner. "I can play even on an old country piano," she boasted.

And then she saw his face. It was paler than the hands which sought to conceal it.

"No, no music! Never again!" he muttered. He fell weakly into the nearest chair, and with a low moan laid his head on the arm.

Sudden intuition flooded Anne's being. How blind she had been! How was it possible that she had not recognized him sooner? A figure so well known, seen and listened to by her so many times?

She approached and laid her hand on the bowed head.

"I know you now, Mr. Petrovsky. It was very stupid of me not to have guessed before, only the light in the hut was so very poor. But please don't be worried," she added gently, as his drawn young face looked up into hers. "I can keep a secret very well indeed, and my one desire is to help you. You are not fit to go back to that lonely cabin to-night. You must stay here, and we will see how you are in the morning."

He cast a wild glance about the rustic little room, as if he feared someone might spring out upon him from behind the pretty chintz curtains.

"You cannot know how terrible this is," he said. "It is only a few weeks now—since it happened." He choked over the words. "And I feel as if I should like to hide forever."

"But there is nothing to be ashamed of—" she commenced. "Ashamed," he cried, savagely. "I'm not ashamed! Only I'm full of hatred, of disgust for everyone and everything. I wish I could die!"

The tortured voice sent a lump into Anne's throat. She knelt beside the chair and laid a compassionate arm about the shaking shoulders.

"Come," said she. "You are ill and over-wrought. We will go upstairs and Regina and I will help you to bed. There's a good boy!"

The protective gesture, the kind words were too much. Utterly beside himself, he turned and laid his head upon the refuge of her breast.

"You are good, good," he whispered. "You are not disappointed in me because I'm a failure. You are not greedy like the others, who only want what they can get out of me. Yes, I will trust you and I will stay."

As he raised his head, she felt her neck was moistened with his tears.

CHAPTER II

ESCAPADE

After a sleepless night, Anne dozed late. So when Regina brought in her coffee about nine o'clock as usual, she awakened gropingly to fog. Fog, which filtered in at the windows in layers of pale moonlight, and wreathed about the house an ectoplasmic shroud until for a long moment Anne had the illusion of floating through clouds in a dreamship.

Then Regina spoke.

"*Dio mio*, it's as chill as the finger of death in here!" She closed the windows violently. "When will you learn to take care of yourself, *carina*?"

Anne smiled. She was accustomed to these wild admonitions. She sat up in bed and slipped into the green silk kimono which Regina was holding out to her. The contrast between her own slim white arms and the woman's knotted brown hands pleased her impersonally. She allowed her fingers to rest upon Regina's sleeve. Relaxed and peaceful, the enshrouding fog rose like a protecting wall between her and an irksome world. She sighed luxuriantly at the thought of having left it all behind her.

Then the memory of last night swooped down upon her with the clamorous beat of wings and sleep departed. She clasped Regina's wrist with tense fingers.

"Regina, how is he? Where is he this morning?" she exclaimed wide awake and anxious. "I had forgotten all about him, poor boy!"

The woman smiled benevolently. She placed the tray upon a table beside the bed.

"He sleeps, *cara*, he sleeps. I but this moment popped my head in at the door and he was lying there as still and quiet as a child, *poverino*. So don't worry your little head about him, but eat your breakfast before it freezes to a jelly."

But Anne did not hesitate. With a lithe movement she was out of bed. Twisting the brazen rope of hair about her small head, she fastened it with a massive gold hairpin. Then, a mediæval princess, in trailing green draperies, she swept from the room.

Left alone, Regina thrust hands and eyes to heaven and called out upon her picturesque God. Then she shrugged with Italian fatalism and despair. What else could she have expected? It had been so from the very first. Anne had always had her own way, ever since she herself had gone to her as nurse when as a little girl they had lived in the *palazzo* in Florence and her father had been the American consul. Married and a widow, she still remained the same wilful child in the eyes of the faithful, long-suffering, old woman.

With a shake of the white head, she followed her mistress out into the narrow hallway and watched disapprovingly, as she disappeared into the opposite room.

It was cold in there and Anne shivered a little as she entered. The fog shimmered in from the open window, writhing itself between her and the recumbent figure on the bed. Like Regina, she closed the window, although less violently, smiling the while to herself at the similarity of their action. Approaching the bed, she looked down upon the sleeper. He was flushed and breathing irregularly, and Anne was glad she had not trusted to Regina's optimistic inspection. For his hand and forehead were burning and her touch did not arouse him. Rather alarmed, she took him by the shoulders and shook him gently. He muttered, and opening his eyes, gazed up at her, at first vacantly, then with dawning dread.

Although her heart beat a little faster, she smiled serenely down upon him. "Well?"

He turned his head away quickly, and for a moment the unnatural flush was replaced by the glistening pallor of the day before.

"I must get up. I must go back," he said self-consciously. "I have trespassed upon you most shamefully. What can you think of me?" Still avoiding her eye, he sat up in bed and ran an unsteady hand through his tumbled hair.

The serene smile upon her lips, she shook her head.

"Do you really want to know what I think? I think you are going to stay right here, young man, for unless I am much mistaken, you have fever, and if that is the case, I shall not permit you to get up at all!"

He tossed his blonde mane impatiently.

"Fever? Nonsense! I'm perfectly all right. There's nothing the matter with me at all, and I am going to get up!" Flushed and unsteady, he stared at her defiantly, prepared to throw off the clothes and jump out of bed. Then remembered with horror that he was attired in one of Regina's ample and unpoetic nightrobes, and inhibited the impulse with a groan.

Repressing her amusement, Anne approached and took his wrist in cool, silken fingers. "I'm going to take your temperature, and if you have any fever, I shall send for a doctor at once," she announced composedly.

Horror stalked across the young face.

"No, no, you mustn't do that!" he exclaimed. "Nobody must see me, nobody must know where I am! I'll do anything you want, if only you won't send for a doctor, or let anyone know I am here!"

His feverish clasp about her hands, Anne encountered his imploring look with gravity.

"Very well, I have your promise. I don't know just how much it is worth, of course, it is up to you to show me. Now lie down again, and be a good patient while I get the thermometer and change my dress."

Head obediently on the pillow, his eyes rested upon her wistfully as she moved toward the door.

"Must you change, you look so beautiful like that," he said simply. "Your lines are so flowing, so fluid, like music. A *Débussy* prelude."

Her hand on the knob, she laughed a little tremulously.

"Your temperature must be even higher than I feared," she said lightly; looking at him rather shyly

over her shoulder, she left the room.

The next two days she and Regina were in constant attendance. His fever had risen rapidly at first and Anne had feared that after all she might have to break her word and call in a doctor. She could even have done so without his knowledge, for most of the time he had lain in a heavy slumber, from which she and Regina had difficulty in arousing him for his medicine. But she resisted the temptation. And when the fever finally commenced to drop, experienced a triumph disproportionately disturbing, which she explained to herself as relief from the intolerable responsibility of her position.

The afternoon of the second day, as she sat beside the window the sense of relief filtering through her, Regina came into the room, and with a great show of excitement and mystery, handed her the New York paper.

She pointed to a picture on the second page, with excitement.

"*Ecco lo*, there he is!" she exclaimed in a whisper. "And I guessed it the moment I set eyes on him. For haven't I sat a dozen times in the gallery and listened to him while he played, poor angel!" She approached and looked down at the boy with a mixture of compassion and adoration. "*Poverino*, how he has suffered," she added, as she smoothed the bedclothes beneath the unshaven young chin.

Anne took the paper and looked at the photograph. It was indeed he, violin under one arm, who looked at her with cryptic eyes, eyes laden with all the tragedy of genius.

She sighed. A little shiver passed through her, as she glanced toward the bed. Why was genius inevitably companioned by suffering? Why did those who possess it harbor such strange magnetism, even when their personalities were often repellent and ugly? And as she looked upon the sleeping boy, an emotion to which she was not accustomed stole upon Anne and kindled a flame, which scorched as well as warmed. An embryonic temperament, drugged with artificial activities, somnolent from ennui, stirred within her. With a flutter of self-ridicule she focussed her attention upon the newspaper in her hand, and read through the headlines mechanically.

FAMOUS YOUNG MUSICIAN STILL MISSING
IN SPITE OF FRANTIC SEARCH BY
ANXIOUS RELATIVES

Alexis Petrovsky, who escaped ten days ago from the sanitarium where he had gone to recuperate from nervous shock following upon his unfortunate breakdown in Carnegie Hall last April, is still missing, and a lake near the sanitarium is being dragged for his body, as it is feared that in his state of acute melancholia he may have made away with himself. Etc., etc.

There followed encomiums upon his art and the great loss his death would be to the musical world in general.

So he had relatives, mused Anne, and for some cryptic reason was unpleasantly stirred by the fact. That ought to have occurred to her in the beginning and they were—how had the newspaper put it?—frantic? Yes, that was it. They would be, of course. And she was aiding and abetting this unnatural young man to make them so. Put in that way, the fact sounded very disagreeable, and yet—? She finished the article with an impatient sigh, and turning her head, saw that the mysterious object of her speculation was awake and looking at her. There was an odd little smile upon his lips and his eyes were very lucid. Conscious of a flaming and obnoxiously juvenile blush, she folded the paper quickly and threw it aside.

"Too late!" he exclaimed in a rather weak voice. "I have caught a glimpse of my beauteous self and know the worst. So they haven't been able to keep it out of the papers, after all? Please show it to me."

He held out a long thin hand and she gave him the paper without further parley. He sat up in bed and read the article from start to finish.

"Damn it!" he exclaimed, but rather placidly she thought. Somehow he had the air of a naughty and triumphant small boy. "This is an awful bore. What can I do to stop this parrots' talk?"

"Let them know of your whereabouts, I suppose," she replied laconically. She walked to the window and looked out through the vista of trees. "It is quite natural they should be worried," she added non-committally.

"I suppose you think I'm a brute." His eyes lingered upon the pearly nape of neck, where the copper tendrils coiled so densely. "But if you knew all the circumstances, I believe you would understand."

The effort at self-command, the something piteous in his voice thawed her superficial coldness. A gentle rush of emotion coursed through her. She turned toward him impulsively.

"Of course I don't think you're a brute! What right would I have to do that, when I am ignorant of the facts? Only I do think you ought to let them know——"

He sat up in bed interrupting her savagely.

"I can't go back—I won't go back!" he cried in a desperate voice. "You don't know what you are asking of me!"

A pang of curiosity shot through Anne against her will. Why and of what was he so full of hatred and fear? But her manner was calm and impersonal as she approached him.

"Perhaps you might let them know that you are safe and with friends, and let it go at that?" she suggested soothingly.

He shot her a strange look.

"Much she cares about my safety!" he muttered under his breath. Anne heard with an unacknowledged but irritating pang. So there was a wife, after all, in spite of his almost adolescent appearance!

"Shall I send your wife a telegram?" she inquired in a matter-of-fact tone.

"My wife!" he stared at her in surprise. "My mother, you mean!"

Relief welled up in Anne's heart, but she chose to ignore its humiliating presence. "Your mother,

then?" she pursued evenly.

"Yes I suppose we had better," he acknowledged grudgingly. "But she is absolutely not to know where I am, or to try to communicate with me until I myself make the first move. That is to be understood."

"Very well," said Anne with composure. "I'm sure we can manage that. It might be a good idea to write a letter and have my chauffeur take it down to New York and mail it from there? Or perhaps it would be even better if he took it to your house and left it there. Then there would be no postmark."

"You're wonderful," he cried enthusiastically. "I never would have thought of that!"

She met his look of admiration demurely.

"Oh no, it is really a very simple idea. I'll go and get some notepaper and you had better write it yourself, so that your mother can be sure that the letter is absolutely genuine."

Acting as curb to his impetuosity and anger, she helped him to concoct one of the strangest letters that a mother ever received. Such a glacial letter, in spite of her own compassionate tempering, that at the end Anne was loath to send it at all.

"It will break her heart," she said sorrowfully.

But he laughed at her with bitter emphasis.

"Heart? She doesn't possess one! All she cares about is what she can get out of me, not only in money, but in vicarious fame, as the fond mother of a musical prodigy!"

Shocked and pitiful, Anne regarded him. His flushed cheeks and gleaming eyes warned of the ever-present danger of recurring fever. She spoke kindly as if to a sick child.

"I'm sure you're exciting yourself unnecessarily. This will never do. You're not at all well, and things appear exaggeratedly awful. I'm sure your mother loves you, how could she help it?"

"Loves me? That is good! Why, she has bled me since I was seven years old. She has sometimes kept me at my violin until I have fainted from exhaustion. She has purposely isolated me from all friends and interests so that I might have no outside influences to distract me. Because of her, my life has been as narrow and as bleak as that of a Trappist Monk. We have never had any home, any ties. We have traveled from city to city, like a couple of strolling players, and lived almost as poorly, although ever since my twelfth year I have brought in thousands. But she wanted to hoard. It is her passion. She's very greedy. In fact, she's insatiable. She has always insisted upon being my business manager, and it wasn't until a couple of years ago when I was twenty-one that I was allowed the use of some of my own money. And then it was only because the doctors frightened her!"

Anne met the triumph in his eyes with an inward shiver.

"Were you so ill?" she inquired, curiosity struggling with repugnance.

"No, but I was so damned neurotic and unsociable and had acquired so many complexes that they were afraid I would develop dementia praecox if my chains weren't slackened up a bit."

"Poor boy, what happened then?" Anne seated herself on the foot of his bed and prepared to listen to the end. Very possibly, mental catharsis might succeed where the rest-cure had failed.

He continued vehemently.

"What happened? I took a three months' vacation from my music, which I had begun to detest in a furtive, unacknowledged, sort of way, and for a time ran completely wild. I was like an animal let out of a cage. I ran around with a pack of fools who took me into every sort of imaginable den and got me into every kind of imaginable scrape. In fact, it was only the force of money and my mother's constant watchfulness which kept me out of the newspapers at least a dozen times."

"But—but didn't she try to interfere? To reason with you?" Anne was remotely angry at herself for being offended by this recital.

His laugh was sinister. The expression on his young face mephistophelian.

"Interfere? Why no, of course not. This fling was part of her own plans, and according to the psychoanalyst for whom she was going in heavily at the time, I would come out a better money-making proposition. In other words, she expected to reap from my wild oats a bounteous harvest for the future!"

Amused at Anne's horrified expression, he chuckled sardonically.

"Motherly of her, don't you think? But unfortunately, for her tender intentions, the experiment was an awful fluke. I came out of it as suddenly as I went in, only more melancholy, more morose than before, utterly disgusted and sickened with the whole scheme of creation. I wouldn't touch my violin for days, and for similar periods they couldn't get me away from it long enough to eat or sleep. I gave a few recitals, brilliant but uneven, and the critics were less kind than usual. My mother was in a perfect funk, but I was utterly indifferent. Nothing interested me at all. It was too much trouble even to live, and if I had condescended to anything so positive as a wish, it would have been for death."

He paused, and threw himself back wearily upon the pillow. "In fact, that is the way I am now, only the longing is intense instead of indifferent." He closed his eyes. An expression of fatigue and disdain brooded over his drawn features.

Anne leaned forward impulsively and took his long, hot hand in both of hers. "Don't," she begged, "I cannot bear to hear you speak so. It wrings something in my soul. Surely, you will not remain so unhappy always. Your music, your beautiful music will console you. It cannot fail!"

His fingers twined about hers almost painfully.

"My music, my beautiful music," he murmured. He turned his head on the pillow restlessly. "I shall not make it any more. I'm not fit, I have dishonored it, and it will not come to me any more. That night—" he faltered and turned his head away from her pitying eyes. "When I failed, you know?" His voice demanded her help.

"Yes, yes, I know," she whispered. "I was not there, but I read about it in the paper. I felt so sorry, so heartbroken for you. I had heard you so often, and with such joy."

Tears in his eyes, he looked up at her gratefully and continued, "That night I was playing as usual, in fact a little better than usual, when all of a sudden every note went out of my head completely, and left nothing but a blank. It was as if music had ceased to exist. I wasn't frightened or ill, I simply couldn't play the violin any more. That was all. Since then I haven't touched it."

Drawing his hand abruptly out of hers, he turned on his side and hid his face in the pillow. She rose, and standing by the head of the bed, put her fingers on his tumbled, blonde head.

"Poor boy, how horribly you have suffered! But I know you are going to come out of it better and stronger than ever. You are so young! The saying ought to be, 'Where there is youth there is hope.'" She sighed inaudibly, remembering her thirty-three years with a pang. "Besides, you are really lucky to have gone through your hell so early, while you can still reap the benefits from it. For most of us it comes too late and we retire defeated into middle age and spiritual death. But," she patted his head lightly, "I don't want to preach. It isn't my *métier* at all! I'm supposed to be frivolous! However, tell me, I simply must know before I leave you, why did you run away from the sanitarium like that without letting anyone know, and how did you ever find the hut?"

Beneath his laughter there lay an undercurrent of almost fierce despair.

"Because I should have gone completely mad if I had stayed another minute. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I was scarcely capable of thought, and yet they tried to cheer me up as if I were an automaton, and all they had to do was to turn a crank. I was supposed to sit on the lawn and drink iced postum and be sociable with my fellow pariahs. Then the radio was turned on every night and those who could still hobble were expected to dance. So wholesome, you know. Half crazed already, the canned music and canned joviality finished me. The jazz sounded in my ears all night. I felt as if my soul were being pounded into a jelly. I couldn't sleep a wink. So I packed my things and stole away without saying a word. I think I had some delirious idea of losing myself and my identity forever. I hiked for the first few days, keeping to the woods for fear of being found. I got my meals at stray farmhouses and slept once or twice in a barn. When I came to the hut I was pretty well exhausted and decided to rest up for a day or two. That's all," he sighed wearily.

Anne's eyes were full of compassionate horror.

"Poor boy, it must have been ghastly. I scarcely wonder you wanted to end it all. And it was I who awakened you from your first good sleep. Will you ever forgive me for bringing you back to this sordid old world?"

He looked up at her with worshipping eyes.

"Not sordid with you in it," he caught at her hand and retained it. "You are the fairy princess, you know, who broke the evil spell. To-day I feel—almost healed."

The mournful young voice went to her heart. With an assumption of gayety she ran to the window and pulled down the shade.

"Very pretty indeed from a sick child. But now I am really going. You must sleep. Later on I will bring you a little supper, your first real meal under my roof, and we will discuss the future. Meanwhile I will give your letter to my chauffeur, who is going into New York anyway, to bring back some necessary things for the house. And now, sweet dreams."

She turned to leave the room, but before she could stop him he drew her hand to his lips and kissed the palm passionately and with reverence.

The next day he was so much better that he was allowed to sit up in bed and dictate to Regina as to the proper disposal of the contents of his suitcase which Anne's chauffeur had packed and brought down from the hut before leaving for New York. Attired in a pair of his own pajamas, hair brushed, face and hands washed by the delighted and flustered old woman, Alexis was seriously contemplating a shave, when at the bottom of the suitcase beneath some silk socks he came upon Claire's picture.

He drew it out slowly, an expression of shrinking upon his face. Where had it come from? He certainly would never consciously have packed it among his things. And neither would his mother have done so. The girl herself, pitiful, sentimental little fool must have secreted it among his things hoping that he would come upon it, and perhaps cast her a random thought, as one throws a bone to a dog. For Claire was like a dog, with the same beseeching, tragic gaze that looked up at him now from the photograph so reproachfully. A tremor of rage swept over him as he met those wistful eyes. Damn it, what right had she to reproach him and to look so woebegone! As if he, Alexis, were to blame for everything. Hadn't she fallen in with his mother's plans with alacrity, with indecency even? Yes, they had tricked him nicely between them. Claire's visit to his room in the dead of night and his mother's neatly-timed discovery, and accusations. What else had there been to do after that, but to marry the girl though they were both innocent even in thought? No, Claire had no right to reproach him, for she had deceived him, too. His mother, for her own cryptic purposes and Claire in self-deluded passion. He had done the only thing possible under the circumstances. Was it his fault that he had never been able to love her? He had told her so from the beginning, hadn't he? She had nothing to complain of. If he had neglected her, he at least had been faithful in a technical sense. What mattered it if the faithfulness had proceeded from indifference, rather than from a sense of strict virtue? The fact remained, he had been faithful. And to what? A tool of his insatiable mother; a toy thrown to serve as outlet for hitherto-repressed physical desires; a stuffed doll to appease nascent passion.

He threw the picture from him with a savage gesture and laughed aloud, much to Regina's alarm. She hastened to his side.

"The *signorino* is feeling gay?" she said hopefully, but with a tinge of suspicion. The young man's expression was anything but gay! "Shall I call my *signora*?"

He looked at the woman oddly.

"Please do," he mocked. "I want her to laugh with me!"

His wild look frightened the woman, she ran out of the room, and presently Anne came in.

"Do you want me?" she asked quietly, with a quick glance at his excited face.

He nodded grimly.

"I want to show you something. Do you see this picture?" He held out the photograph. Anne approached the bed.

"Is it your sister?" she noted the trembling fingers with apprehension. A sudden knife-like foreboding pierced her.

"My sister!" he laughed. "No, unfortunately, no. This," he pointed a trembling, contemptuous finger at the small tragic face, "this is a photograph of my wife."

Anne's smile was a triumph of indifference.

"Indeed?" she said coolly. "She looks like quite a child, doesn't she?"

She sat down calmly upon the chair beside the bed.

Angered by her serenity, he flung her a look of mingled hatred and remorse.

"I suppose you are wondering why I didn't tell you about her yesterday?" he grumbled.

She lifted her brows in astonishment, her green eyes met his coolly beneath unfathomable lashes.

"Not at all, it is your own affair, isn't it?" her voice was icy.

"Ah, you are angry!" he exclaimed with satisfaction. "I can see you are. I don't suppose you'd believe me if I told you that I completely forgot all about her?"

"Hardly!" Anne's lips tightened unconsciously.

"Well, believe it or not, that is the truth! My so-called wife counts for so little in my life, I seldom even think of her, and when you asked to whom we should write yesterday, she never entered my head. That is the only explanation I have to offer."

Anne returned his pleading glance with perfect composure. She took the photograph out of his hand and gazed at it. As she met the girl's eyes, a tremor of sympathy quivered through her.

"She seems a pitiful little creature," she murmured almost against her will. "Why are you so hard on her?" She avoided his eyes.

"Because I don't love her, I suppose!" he exclaimed harshly. "And when one doesn't love a woman, one hates her. It is her own fault. She thrust herself into my life of her own accord when my will was crushed and almost dead, and I never shall forgive her for it. That is all."

Once more Anne interposed in the other woman's behalf.

"How pitiless you are! I don't believe you understand her at all. Perhaps she loves you? Indeed I am sure she must love you."

"Loves me," he jeered, "she thinks she does, she is a born satellite. Her docility fills me with hatred, lowers me. When I am with her I feel that I am having intercourse with a slave, a chattel." He flung his hands out before him, in excess of emotion, then added more quietly, "but that is all over now. For weeks I have barely spoken to her, and it is my intention never to see her again if possible."

Anne shook her head gently.

"Unfortunately, one cannot end things like that."

He looked at her angrily.

"Why not? If she is such a fool as to refuse to divorce me, at least I can refuse to see her!"

"Have you spoken to her of divorce?"

"Of course. But she will not listen. You see she is a Roman Catholic and something of a mystic to boot. But why do we bother about her so much?" He shrugged cynically. "She is negligible. I have often forgotten her existence for weeks at a time. That is why I don't understand why the very thought of her can upset me so."

There was something uncanny in the comprehending look which Anne cast at him.

"That is because you cannot forgive her the injury you have done her. It is her pain and not her love which bores you. It is the memory of your own suffering and debased self which you hate in her. She is so associated with your weakness that the very mention of her name fills you with hatred and humiliation. It is not her fault at all."

The calm voice ceased. Alexis faced the compassionate eyes with horror in his own.

"No, you are wrong, you are wrong. You do not understand." Then, as she continued to look at him as from a great distance, "Don't make me loathe myself more than I do already!" he pleaded.

With an odd little smile she turned to leave the room.

"Perhaps I am mistaken," she said softly, her hand on the knob. "But somehow I don't believe I am. Think it over."

The odd smile lingering about her lips, she pulled the door slowly between them and was gone.

A sense of void surged over him, in a sickening sweep. He fell back upon the pillow with a suppressed groan. She had gone, misunderstanding in her heart. To explain fully and in detail would be the act of a cad, an act of which even he was incapable. For a moment his very center of gravity seemed to disintegrate. Then came the familiar blankness of despair.

LIFE'S GLAMOUR

With the death of her husband, freedom had descended upon Anne like a gift of the gods. A divine ointment, it penetrated her bruised spirit, allaying the stored-up bitterness of years. Her heart emptied itself of poison and welled with compassion for the pitiful ending of a futile life. As her husband lay back upon the pillows, broken beyond all aid, unbelievably aged, she almost forgave the insult to her youth that their common life had proved. If it had only been a case of disparity of age, no question of forgiveness would have existed at all. The twenty odd years between them might have been forged into the strongest instead of the weakest link that bound them together. It was this very disparity, in fact, which at first had attracted her to him, with the enormous flattery it implied. Her immaturity had thrilled to the condescension as it could never thrill for the horde of barbaric youngsters who formed the guard-gallant of her first New York season. Emerging from an environment entirely continental, she was accustomed to the attentions of men belonging to an older race, whose suave courtesy had its roots in the antique. From the consulates in Rome and Florence which her father had occupied ingloriously but with utter content, she had brought an old-world respect and appreciation for maturity utterly foreign to young America of even fifteen years ago. And in these respects Julius Schuyler had satisfied her entirely. In her eyes he was not only a polished, traveled and well-read man of the world, he was brilliant. He dominated. His sketches were not the mere fads of a supremely idle and blasé man. They flamed with talent. Their very unfinished condition proved it. When so much can be suggested by the mere sweep of a line, why satiate the spectator further? So she had accepted him at her own adolescent valuation, glowing dewily beneath his tired, vivacious gaze.

For it was his forte to be sprightly. The ready repartee was ever on his lips, nor was the pun scorned. No matter how trite, how forced the shaft, it played the most important rôle in his armory. To the ears of eighteen the pompous straining was inaudible, the weary dissatisfaction which it served to conceal, practically invisible. It was not until the forcing-house of marriage, the constant companionship, had opened her eyes that she glimpsed the actual man through the shallow smoke-screen behind which he strove to cover an aching ennui, an intolerable insufficiency.

Meanwhile his admiration had gone completely to her young head. The fumes of it were sweet to her unaccustomed nostrils. Almost before she was aware of it, she had consented to marry him. So it came about that before the end of her first season she had acquired a husband twenty-five years her senior, still active, distinguished in appearance, although already gray, and incidentally wealthy, besides whose fortune her father's very comfortable means dwindled ludicrously.

And yet perhaps it had not been so bad in the long run. After all, Julius Schuyler had been a gentleman and always acquitted himself as such. For Anne there had been no brutality, no animalism to encounter. Only the monotony of an endless and artificial vivacity, the ever forcing of herself to keep up her rôle of amused and humble spectator and playmate.

He was so small, so finicky, with his endless devices for passing the time. His double solitaire, his dominoes, his checkers which he would always produce at the hint of an empty half hour. Multi-subterfuges for cheating the gnawing ennui which with the years had fastened itself upon him like a cancer. Disliking all games intensely, Anne had at first absolutely refused to share in these puerile feints against time. But, after a while, when all effort at conversation languished in the anæmic soil of his irritating triteness, she had capitulated. They played checkers in Amalfi, his back turned to the glorious bay, her subconscious bathing in its blue flame; dominoes in Luxor with the Tombs of the Kings beckoning on the glamorous horizon line; two-handed bridge on the terrace of their villa in Florence, while the setting sun tinted the Arno and set afire the mammoth dome of the old cathedral.

However, there had been compensations. The silver lining to her cloud had provided a background of decided luxury. Travel brought contact with a cosmopolitan, ever-changing, group who gave the beautiful American that delicate homage, tinged with desire, which is stimulating to a feminine ego, dissatisfied and unawakened. Intervals between *tête-à-tête* games were sometimes brilliant and prolonged. The buying of the villa in Florence was a joy, almost unmitigated by the fussy alterations of Julius who imagined he understood old furniture, and the *Cinque-Cento*. It was sheer rapture to return to Florence, to resume old friendships, revisit in stealth old haunts.

But her vitality was sapped by Julius' greedy monopoly. He clung with the persistency of an *âme damnée*. He accompanied her to the dressmaker, where she was draped according to his finicky conception of her type. He chose her hats. He bought her underwear, all of the very finest, of course. But when she wore it beneath his complacent eyes, self-consciousness became an agony which habit refused to dull. If passion had underlain the complacence, she would not have minded even this. But Julius never forgot himself in his love for her. His natural diffidence was a perpetual audience, the unwelcome third in all their intercourse. Never impulsive, his caresses lacked the white heat of passion which is clean because spontaneous. Beneath his touch, Anne felt herself perpetually under the microscope. It seemed as if he were vain, not of his prowess, but of still being capable of harboring sensation at all. And habit made her quick to notice that these lapses into anæmic appetite usually followed the prodding of some erotic book or play, and were seldom occasioned by her own desirability. She became practiced in the art of retreat and withdrawal, so that the whole nature of love was distorted. Still, a sort of pity for his maimed spirit kept her silent. She closed her eyes and tried deliberately to become callous. However, she made up her mind that if so precious a commodity as freedom ever came within her grasp again, she would never permit it to escape.

And now that this freedom had been hers for almost five years, its realization had exceeded her keenest expectations. Evading every opportunity of remarriage, she had skilfully apportioned her seasons between the United States and Europe. The New York season was invariably followed by a

few weeks in Egypt or the Riviera and capped by three sensuous months in the Florentine villa. And this was the best-loved time of all, in which she renewed body and soul, absorbing peace and serenity from the olive-crueted hills upon whose sides multi-colored villas gleamed like jewels in dark tresses.

Within her small but cherished garden, rose a terrace paved with bricks. One attained it by a narrow flight of moss-grown steps. Here she would sit for hours, basking beneath the sun which rode the heavens like an impartial god, while beyond the pallid balustrade, cypress-studded hills merged into the horizontal purple.

Here it was that she received her friends for tea, listening indulgently to lascivious, Tuscan, gossip. Then, alone once more, after her late dinner, or companioned by the man of the hour, it was here she would pace up and down in the sweet-scented dusk while myriads of fireflies like a flaming milky way disbanded at her approach. And high above the swarthy cypresses the sun's paramour, the moon, shamelessly flaunted in his reflected rays.

Those were enchanted nights into which Julius's memory intruded like the sordid wraith from another existence; a warning wraith with finger on lips, whose image tempered Anne's blood. Not that she was discreet, for that was a quality Anne had never troubled to acquire. In fact, her dealings were so recklessly above-board that she was suspected of untold depths of wickedness. A beautiful woman who paces under the stars at midnight with now one man, now another, cannot hope to escape slander.

Although perfectly aware of this fact, Anne chose to ignore it. Even the nominal chaperonage of some poor, but genteel, relative seemed insupportable to the fierce and rapturous reaction through which she was passing. She remained defiantly alone. Her charm, her elegance, and most certainly her wealth (in that way Florentines are most human) carried her through. But rumor was building a wall of eccentricity about her and she was rapidly becoming known, both on the Continent and in America, as rather terrifyingly individual, and an image-breaker.

The most conservative began to drop off almost imperceptibly, leaving a large circle of spirits who prided themselves upon a freedom akin to looseness, and a small band of intimates too close to be affected by the whispers of the scurrilous. Among the latter, the Marchese Torrigiani and his mother refused steadfastly to believe anything but the best of Anne. Their friendship of years continued undisrupted, and both mother and son looked forward with eagerness to the day when Anne would weary of her precarious liberty, and consent to become Vittorio's wife. But although she admitted to an affection for Vittorio which at times flickered into transient tenderness, her marriage with Julius had developed a complex which made it impossible for her to contemplate the subject without a shrinking horror. Meanwhile the Marchese waited, hoping almost against hope, that with the passing of time the lacerating memory would fade away. But so far it had refused to do so and there were hours when it seemed to the steadfast man as if the scar were branded into Anne's very soul. Accepting his homage as a matter of course, she had continued to drift along the path of least resistance.

But latterly, a new restlessness was creeping in, and life had somehow lost its savour. The New York season was becoming a grind. Her friends were either blatantly rich, meretricious and over-fed, mere excitement chasers, or else pretenders, *art fainéants*, who dabbled in cubes and sex. Neurotic composers who dribbled mediocrities over the piano keys. Pseudo writers who reveled in the drab, perhaps because any further flight was beyond their stunted wings. Anne was growing to hate them all, and herself the most, because she had remained too indolent or too powerless to rise above their level. There were superior beings, of course, who were achieving the real thing somewhere. But they dwelt on a different plane, in a workers' world of their own, whose fastnesses she had never as yet been able to scale. Her music was good, even excellent, almost professional, but that irritating adverb "almost" rose like an impassable Chinese wall, thrusting her forever into the destinationless region of the dilettantes.

Beautiful, brilliant, talented, she remained negligible in her own hypercritical eyes.

To oust this growing dissatisfaction which had sifted into the indolent drift of her life and was gradually embittering it, Anne had literally taken to her heels. Two weeks alone with the mountains had brought a certain serenity. Already the miserly future looked less blank. Soothed by solitudes and distance, her inflamed ego was content to sink into the great whole. After all, there were compensations. She might not be a genius, but that did not prevent genius from existing! And personality was only an illusion after all, a hollow shell, within which the Great Spirit differentiated. Who was she to grumble in the face of this universal oneness, into which her littleness merged so superbly? The healing breath of the forest swept her clean of vanity. Her soul rejoiced in the vigor of its new-found simplicity. She spent her days roaming in the woods, or paddling about in a canoe on the unrippled waters of the chaste little lake. She re-read one or two favorite books, but all the time her mind remained contentedly empty and receptive, like an airing room whose windows are unclosed to the winds of heaven.

It was in this mood she had come upon the hut and Alexis. Her sleeping self had reawakened and once more taken her into possession. But it was a rested and less inverted self, a younger and more ingenuous self, who still admitted the futility of happiness but dimly craved it. In her present chastened mood she was determined to oust the personal factor. There had been too much of that in all her previous dealings with men. It had always been to that quality of pervasive femininity to which they had succumbed, and consciously or unconsciously, she had never failed to assert it. She was going to change all that. Here was a boy, probably ten years her junior, whose plight would arouse the sympathy of the veriest egotist. Whose unhappiness, combined with his genius, stirred the stagnant pool of her soul. Her quickened spirit responded to his need with almost complete self-forgetfulness. That genius should come to her door in the guise of a postulant, just as she herself had become resigned to her own lack of it, seemed the culminating miracle to her new-found peace of mind. To heal this bruised spirit and send it back to the world in the glory of renewed splendor was her job. And nothing less than success would satisfy her. For once she would step out of the amateur class and prove that she could do one thing thoroughly and well, even if it were so infinitesimal a thing as the

rescue of a soul.

CHAPTER IV

THE PAWN

It was one of those crystal October days, when the air is crisp and clean, tempered by a kindly sun and Central Park is etched in russet and gold against a sky of opalescent clouds.

Huddled against the cushions of a high window seat, Claire gazed down upon it all from the eleventh story of the huge apartment building in 59th Street where she and Mme. Petrovsky had been installed for the last year. It was the customary, rather sumptuous, decidedly characteristic studio apartment which they had been in the habit of occupying for the last five or six years, ever since Alexis had commenced to be known. Walnut paneling, canopied bed, old blue brocade covers and hangings, reeked of the interior decorator; the only personal touches which had survived Claire's listlessness being a carved ivory rosary hanging over the bedpost, a few French and Italian novels of the emotional school, and a large photograph of Alexis which scowled out upon the world from the dressing table.

At first glance, the crouching girl upon the window seat seemed as nondescript as the room. Almost frighteningly fragile in her dark street dress, she would have been entirely insignificant if it had not been for the appalling misery of her eyes. They brimmed with the sorrowfulness of a kicked puppy. In their heavy-lidded gaze was mirrored the atavistic agony of womankind. Weary, all-revealing, they stared down upon the brilliant park below, while she listlessly stroked the bizarre head of a Brussels Griffon curled upon her skirts.

It was the creature next to Alexis which she loved the best in the world, both because Alexis had bought it for her himself on a sudden boyish impulse, and because it loved her with all the devotion in its tiny body. And love was to Claire the food and drink for which her soul was starving. Not that she had ever been cruelly treated. Hers had been a negative sort of misery. When she was a child of six, her mother had died, leaving her in the charge of her aunt, Mme. Petrovsky, in whose boarding house they were then living. Of her father she knew nothing. But sometimes she suspected his official existence. All she knew was that her name was the same as that of her aunt before she had married Nicholas Petrovsky, that strange and exotic Russian musician, who had invaded the boarding house one day before she herself was born, and had never left it until his death several years later.

How well she remembered that boarding house in old London. How scrupulously clean and unutterably dreary it had all been! And how well she remembered her aunt's foreign husband who filled the house from morning till night with the weird sobbings of his violin, until it almost seemed to her child's understanding that one were not in a London boarding house at all, but in an enchanted castle which continually bewailed its pristine glories. It was this music and the author of it which had supplied the only romance of a childhood singularly dull and colorless. And strange to say, the frail, emaciated figure of the musician stood out more clearly in her memory than that of his little boy Alexis, who had been her playmate ever since the beginning of things. It was not until several years later, when his father had died and Alexis was almost ten years old, that he had become the greatest interest and only affection of her lonely little life.

And then the music had come between them. He was always at his violin and the old house echoed plaintively as in the years gone by; only as Claire grew older the wailing ceased to be fairy strains and seemed to be flowing from her own over-charged heart. Then they had suddenly sold the boarding house and gone to Berlin, where Alexis' ambitious mother had put him under one of the best masters. Followed years of traveling and recitals while the boy's fame grew and spread until the outbreak of the great war, when Alexis was fourteen and she a few months younger. They had come to the United States and made it more or less their headquarters while they toured South America, Mexico, and the West Indies.

Now, at the age of twenty-three, Alexis was an idol, not only in every large city of the United States, but in Paris and London as well. Since the end of the war they had returned to the Continent several times and it was while on a visit to Paris, five or six years before, that Alexis had bought Bébé for her.

How well Claire remembered it all. He had been away almost all day, playing for the wounded soldiers in Auteuil and had returned to the hotel downcast and tragic, as always after the sight of the brave *poilus*. She had induced him to go for a walk and had led him along the arcade in the Rue de Rivoli as people and shops always amused and distracted him. They had passed by a dog-fancier's and he had insisted upon going in and buying for her the small Brussels Griffon which stared at them with bulging and egocentric eyes from the shop window. They had been quite gay when they returned to the hotel with the new member of the family, saying they had been married and acquired progeny in the short space of an hour and a half. Mme. Petrovsky had watched them grimly, a strange look in her small eyes, and perhaps, who knows, at least Claire had always imagined that it was then that she conceived the idea of their marriage? But it was not until years after, six months ago in fact, that it had actually occurred, and then so quietly, so almost clandestinely, that it had hardly seemed like a marriage at all. Except for necessary witnesses, the small chapel had been deserted, the priest a stranger. Claire had timidly requested for old Father Gregory to officiate. But her aunt's manner had been so unapproachable that she had not dared to insist. And Alexis so unlike himself that he had scarcely spoken to her for days, barely said more than a few words, in fact, since the night she had gone to his room and Mme. Petrovsky had found her there and acted so strangely. And yet there had been nothing wrong in her going to Alexis like that. She had often done so in the years gone by, especially after a concert, when she knew it would be hours before his tension could relax into sleep. She would sit beside the bed and rub his burning forehead, and they would talk a little in soft whispers, not because they feared his mother might hear, but so as not to break the calm which was stealing over him. Time and time again Alexis had fallen asleep beneath her fingers.

And so, on this particular night, when she heard the restless pacing in the room near hers, it had

been purely instinctive to get up and go to his aid. And indeed he had seemed glad to see her as usual, that is until her aunt had come in upon them and ordered her out so peremptorily. She never knew exactly what passed between them, although the sound of their muffled voices had penetrated to her room for almost an hour, and she herself had not been able to sleep all night for sheer bewilderment.

The next day Alexis had come to her and asked her to marry him. His face was very pale and his manner more distant than she had ever known it, not with the familiar absent-minded air behind which she knew lurked affection and kindness, but vested with a new hostile courtesy that would have struck her as sinister if she had not been too utterly dazed with joy to be analytical.

Since then she had often wondered in secret, and an icy fear had invaded her at times. Could Mme. Petrovskiy have had anything to do with it? Was it possible that she had forced Alexis to ask her to marry him, because she had discovered them together in his room? But if that was the case, would he not have told her about it in one of those unguarded moments when it seemed as if her love had suddenly struck flint to his steel? One of those abandoned moments when he lay in her arms with closed eyes, identity swamped in a vast surge of primitive passion? Ah, yes, he would have told her then. The alternative was too horrible to contemplate. She shuddered. The months passed like a delirious moment. Perched on a see-saw of rapture and terror, she had been flung to the heavens and then plunged into the abyss according to Alexis' moods. And he had become more eccentric every day. His passion, spasmodic from the first, had quickly degenerated into the old absent-minded kindness at best. At times, his irritability had been frightful, but she had always excused it, attributing everything to nerves, constantly strained from excitement and overwork. Then had come his breakdown in Carnegie Hall and the collapse of the world. The doctors had sent him to a sanitarium in the mountains and all had gone well for a few weeks. Until about ten days ago when Alexis had disappeared suddenly off the face of the earth, since when Claire and his mother had existed on the verge of despair. Of course, Mme. Petrovskiy had tried to keep it quiet, but it had leaked out as things always do, and the newspapers had been headlining it for the last week.

Thus it was that Claire's eyes, always plaintive at best, brimmed with the age-old sorrow of the world, and she lay upon the window-sill, heavy with misery, recalling the scenes of childhood, clinging pitifully to their memory like an old woman for whom life has already withdrawn all hope of a future. While at her side, his small soul vaguely troubled, the Griffon whined and tugged at her skirts. Her weary eyes falling upon him presently, a sudden pity seized her for his helplessness. Her hand closed fondly upon his small head.

"Poor Bébé," she murmured, following the little dog's longing glance into the street below. "Shall I take you for a walk?"

At her words, he leaped up into her face rapturously, his furry body vibrant with joyful tail-wagging. She smiled wanly at his eagerness. "Poor Bébé, I've neglected you, haven't I? But I'm so miserable, so miserable!" She caught him up in her arms and hugged him to her so tightly that he yelped in shrill remonstrance. Setting him down with a patient smile she sat down at her toilet table and put on her hat, an uninteresting dark blue turban which emphasized disastrously her insignificance.

As she met her weary eyes in the mirror, her pallor deepened. "No wonder Alexis couldn't love me," she exclaimed in a bitter whisper. "I am ugly, no——" she paused, beating her little fist upon the toilet table. "I am worse than ugly, I am nothing, nobody! How could I expect to hold a genius, a man of fire? And now," she bent her head upon her arms and burst into low, suppressed weeping, "he is lost, perhaps dead! But I can't believe it," she raised her head and gazed at her reflection savagely. "He is not dead, he is only hiding somewhere—from her," she added in a tense whisper. "From us both! Perhaps he has met another woman whom he can really love. If that should happen I wonder what I would do? Kill her? God knows I would want to!" The clenched fists rose to her mouth in a passionate gesture.

The little dog tugged at her skirts. An odd smile upon her lips, she controlled herself with an effort, caught up gloves and bag and led him out of the room.

As they reached the entrance-hall, the doorbell whirred noisily. Claire's heart leaped, and then fell leadenly. Could it, might it be Alexis, at last?

It opened the door. A chauffeur was standing there, a letter in his hand. With a gasp of disappointment Claire signed to the Jap to give it to her.

It was from Alexis.

The beloved hieroglyphics sprawled before her eyes in a happy mist. Addressed not to herself but to Mme. Petrovskiy, they gave her a momentary pang, that vanished quickly beneath the certainty of Alexis' safety. She spoke to the man as steadily as she could.

"Is there—any answer?"

He hesitated. "I don't think so, but I can wait if you like." He stepped through a doorway and sat down gingerly upon a chair which Claire pointed out to him.

A joyful tattoo beating against her ribs, Claire ran down the long vaulted corridor and knocked upon the door of Mme. Petrovskiy's study.

A deep voice boomed permission to enter. Claire burst into the room almost violently.

"It's a letter from Alexis, Aunt. Do please read it and tell me what he says!"

"Give it to me!"

A large woman, seated at a roll-top desk, revolved round in her chair, took the letter without a word and started to read it.

Hands clasped tightly together, Claire watched her eagerly. It was one of those bland, non-committal faces, full and inclined to be weather-beaten, which are often called motherly because they top a large motherly body, and have the smooth expressionless surface of a rag doll. But Claire knew the face very well indeed, had studied it since childhood, so that the minutest pinching of the puckered lips, the slightest increase in color, spoke volumes. And the letter was evidently disturbing indeed, judging from the mottled purple on her aunt's cheeks, the angry clutch of the broad fingers upon the crumpled sheets.

As Mme. Petrovsky turned the last page she laid the letter deliberately upon the desk, and turned her back upon Claire.

"Well," faltered the girl. "Is Alexis all right and is—is he coming back soon? Shall I tell the chauffeur to wait for your answer?"

"There is no answer!"

The voice was harsh and self-contained. For the first time she looked at Claire, who shrank beneath the stare of the small glassy eyes.

"What are you doing in here?" she asked, pinching her lips. "Where you know you are not permitted, you and your dog?" she added with a contemptuous glare, at the microscopic Griffon.

Claire stooped and gathered Béb  up in her arms.

"The—the letter, it is from Alexis!" she stammered. "Please—please read it to me, Aunt!" She trembled visibly at her own boldness.

Her evident fear irritated Mme. Petrovsky.

"Yes, it is from Alexis," she replied glacially, "but there is no message in it for you." She revolved once more in her chair, and commenced to write again fast and furiously.

A low cry of despair and rage escaped Claire.

"You are cruel," she cried chokingly. "I have a right to know! Am I not his wife!"

The revolving chair remained immovable. Mme. Petrovsky bent a purple face over her writing.

"He says he is better, but is taking a further rest-cure, and doesn't wish us to know his address. He will communicate with us later," she replied in suppressed and uneven tones, her obstinate back still turned upon the girl.

Claire gasped with relief.

"Then when he is better, he will come back?" she insisted in a firmer voice.

Mme. Petrovsky threw her pen from her in a violent gesture. The face she turned upon her niece was pale and convulsed.

"He is never coming back!" she cried with suppressed fury. "He is going to manage his own life after this. He says now that he cannot play the violin any more, he is free to live as he likes!"

She rose to her feet, shadowing the stricken girl with her enormous bulk. Her face stared stonily in front of her.

"This is what it has come to," she muttered. "This is his gratitude for a lifetime of devotion and sacrifice. I have worked myself to the bone that his genius might have every chance to develop. Now he throws me aside, as if I were an outgrown toy, and tells me he is going to manage his own life. He who couldn't even make out a check for himself or remember his own address!"

Paralyzed with misery, Claire watched her aunt in a stupor of surprise. This was the first time she had ever known her to reveal any emotion stronger than contempt or a cold sort of anger. And the sight was shattering. Gathering herself together through sheer force of will, she helped her aunt back into the chair and patted the large veined hand timidly.

"He can't mean it," she murmured. "He has been like this before, you know. He really couldn't leave you. Why, he'd be helpless all alone, and without his music." She choked back a sob. Alexis without his violin would be like another man bereft of all five senses. "No, no, he'll come back," she faltered pluckily. "Not for me. He doesn't need me, but for you, his mother."

Mme. Petrovsky looked up into the piteous little face with a sort of hard compassion.

"Poor Claire," she said more gently than she had spoken to her for years, "I sacrificed you for nothing, didn't I?"

A slow blush spread over the girl's transparent features. She raised her head.

"It was no sacrifice," she whispered. "It was my joy, my glory. I—I have always loved him so!"

Then suddenly her eyes flashed.

"If only we could write to him. If only we could get hold of him and tell him how broken you are. It was cruel of him not to leave us his address. Do you think we might inveigle it out of the chauffeur? What do you think, Aunt?"

"That would be a confession of failure," answered the older woman. "Besides, you may be sure he was bound to secrecy. Now, leave me, Claire. I must be alone. I want to think. Take your dog and go out in the park. It will do you good. Perhaps, who knows, things aren't as hopeless as they look?"

With a sudden return of her imperious manner, she waved Claire away. Heavy with dread, the girl put down Béb , fastened the leash on to his bright collar and left the room.

The strange chauffeur was still waiting by the hall door. He seemed her only hope now. She approached him with trembling knees.

"If—if you will tell me where Mr. Petrovsky is I will make it worth your while," she said with a pathetic assumption of firmness.

He stood up as she spoke. His nice blue eyes evaded hers apologetically.

"I'm sorry, miss, but my orders were not to say anything. If there is no answer I must be going." He fidgeted, one hand on the door-knob.

"Very well," she turned away to hide trembling lips. "There is no answer. You may go."

"Very well, miss."

He opened the door and going out into the hall, rang for the elevator. She looked after him hopelessly. Then a sudden idea flashed like a ray of lightning into the black confusion of her mind. She followed him out into the hall quickly.

"Wait a minute, I am going too."

He stood aside, as she entered the elevator in front of him.

They emerged into the pretentious entrance-hall and Claire, still preceding him with Béb  in her arms went out into the sun-lit street.

Hand to his cap, the chauffeur jumped nimbly into a large Cadillac by the curb and drove away. Claire looked after him with an air of frightened triumph. A small pad in her hand, she had hastily scrawled down the license number.

CLAIRE'S RENUNCIATION

For days the sun had shone brilliantly upon the mountainside, and the lodge had long since emerged from its heavy swathing of fog. No longer a boat floating through mystic seas, it was divested of a certain glamour. But remained, nevertheless, a very comfortable and picturesque shelter. Perched pertly beside the road that overhung the valley, it afforded a bird's-eye view of checkered fields and a winding river, that gleamed like a silver girdle about the base of purple hills.

Alexis revelled in the glorious sunshine. Weak, but quiescent after his fever, he was content to sit on the rustic porch, a rug about his knees, and gaze through the brilliant foliage at the vivid valley, which sparkled in the thin autumn air with all the detailed perfection of a mosaic.

This particular morning was the most perfect of them all. With a sigh of enjoyment Alexis stretched his limbs in a perfection of relaxation which he had not known for years.

"It is strange," he said, "how rested and peaceful I feel. All the terrible irritability seems to have left me entirely."

"It went away with the fever-devil," laughed Anne, who was sketching a stunted pine beside the roadway. "A most suitable match, don't you think?"

Alexis laughed uncertainly.

"I only hope it never returns," he said, somewhat uneasily. "Nerves have as many lives as a cat, you know, and an unerring instinct for home. One never can tell when they will spring upon one again from the dark."

"I suppose the moral of that is to always keep a light handy," said Anne gaily, but with a quick glance of pity for the worn boyish face.

"That's all very well, but what if your stock of matches has run out and you're groping about in the dark?" he exclaimed whimsically, but with a significant tightening of the lips.

Anne leaned over and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Then you must ask someone else to give you a light," she said softly. He caught her fingers in his and pressed them.

"Some good Samaritan like you," he cried. His eyes filled with nervous tears.

Anne drew her hand away quietly. This sort of thing was not to be encouraged if she were to obtain the impersonal influence over him which she had intended from the first.

"That is very pretty, but I don't deserve it," she said lightly. "Come, tell me more about yourself. I want to know all about your life. It must be thrilling to be a genius!"

He smiled mournfully.

"Thrilling, I should say not! It is the most narrow life possible. At least mine has been so. Merely a record of travel and hard work. When I was a child we were never long enough in any one place to make any friends, besides my mother always feared they would interfere with my practicing, and later, I had become so pent-up within myself and my music that I had no further desire for them. Claire was the only person I ever saw, outside of my mother, and most of the time I was practically unconscious of her existence."

"Claire—is that your wife?" inquired Anne in spite of herself. She blocked in the background of her sketch with nervous strokes.

"Yes," he cast her a quick, guilty glance. Then, after a pause, "You mustn't think I meant all the rotten things I said about her the other night. I've always been very fond of the poor little thing, only as a wife she meant nothing to me. I suppose you wonder why I married her, and I admit it must seem pitifully weak, only I was in such a state at the time that I really wasn't responsible. Everything was a nightmare of jangled nerves." The vision of his mother threatening to put Claire out upon the streets if he refused to marry her, came before him. An uneven flush spread over his face. His hands clenched the arms of the chair.

"Sometimes I wonder if there isn't a taint of madness in me somewhere, a rotten spot in my brain that is spreading——" He threw out his hands in a gesture of despair.

She met the frantic appeal in his eyes with firm denial.

"You're talking introspective drivel. Summoning prehistoric monsters out of your subconscious cavern. Don't let yourself be frightened by a few dead bones. There is neither madness nor method about you. You are simply too highly organized for your own comfort. In other words, you are a genius and must pay the penalty."

He laughed more naturally.

"So in your opinion every genius must be a poor fool?"

"According to some standards, yes. He was made to walk on the heights, and when he is forced to descend to the valley and mingle with the rest of us his head often remains in the clouds, and he stumbles woefully."

"Don't count yourself in with the rest of them, for heaven's sakes!" exclaimed Alexis, his eyes hypnotized by the bronze aureole of her hair.

She encountered his gaze with a poised smile which for some inexplicable reason, angered him.

"But unfortunately, or fortunately, that is precisely where I belong," she said without a tinge of her old bitterness.

"You may not have any talent for doing any one special thing," he interrupted hotly, "but you, yourself, are so perfect, such a work of art. It must take genius to be just you. Let us say you are genius in the abstract." He smiled at her in sheer pleasure at his own happy phrase.

She rose and putting her sketch on the table, smiled down upon him.

"You're only a baby, after all, aren't you? I think I shall call you my changeling. Come, changeling, how would you like to take a little stroll down to the lake? It is only a moment's walk from here. We

will take some cushions and you can lie back in my canoe and I'll paddle you about for a while."

He stood up eagerly and held out his arms for the gay cushions which she threw at him from the chaise-longue.

"I shall have to learn how to walk all over again," he laughed as they started down the steps.

"Didn't I say you were a baby?" She took his arm with a protecting gesture.

They strolled slowly forward while the brilliant foliage flaunted high overhead and formed an exotic carpet beneath their feet.

From an upper window Regina looked after them and shook a disapproving head.

"*Dio mio*, it begins all over again," she sighed, "and this time with a babe! Will she never be content to settle down? And I who had such fine hopes for the Signor Marchese, so rich and so very respectable!"

There's an intimacy about a canoe which once shared, can change a slight acquaintance into something warm and perhaps enduring.

Anne and Alexis had reached a focus where it seemed to fuse their points of contact perilously. Not that either of them had analyzed it as yet. Alexis as he lay back upon his cushions, was conscious only of the beauty of burnished hair, glamorous eyes and skin, of the god-like frame of trees and lake and sky; the unutterable bliss of such companionship in such surroundings. To him it was like a divine interlude from Purgatory.

Anne was more experienced in such affairs. Her instinct had long ago hinted of danger. But she chose to ignore it, trusting to practice and *savoir faire* to avoid forthcoming pitfalls. As before, she determined to remain mistress of the situation. But it was only natural that the boy's budding worship should stir her. After all, he was no ordinary young man but a genius with a power to move thousands, and had, moreover, a compelling, if somewhat neurotic, personal appeal. And he possessed one quality which Anne had never been able to resist. That of physical beauty. With the classical features of a Greek faun, he combined a fragility, a certain decadent charm, which intrigued her fatigued senses.

And the morning flew by with flashing swiftness. All too soon, they were crunching back over the regal carpet of tinted leaves which showered down upon their heads from the trees like a flock of brittle butterflies.

"I feel like Danae," laughed Anne, as she shook down a golden cluster from a branch above her head.

Alexis regarded her ecstatically.

"They match your hair exactly. But alas, I am not Jupiter. I cannot pour myself upon you in a golden rain."

His eyes met hers with a new audacity. "But I'll dissolve into tears, which will amount to the same thing, if you look at me like that!" he added hastily.

Anne hated herself for flushing. She averted her head.

"You absurd boy! Come, we must hurry, or Regina's lunch will be spoiled. It's so nice and warm today, she promised to serve it on the porch. Won't that be jolly? It's supposed to be a great surprise, but I suspect a *risotto à la Milanese*."

She led the way to the house. A puzzled frown between his straight brows, Alexis followed.

"You are in a great hurry," he said, in hurt tones. "You forget the baby is still learning to walk!" His voice was plaintive in the extreme.

She turned about in quick repentance. His laughing eyes were roguish.

"Changeling!" she murmured. She disdained the arm he held out in feigned weakness. "What shall I do with you, you are incorrigible!"

There was a note of triumph in his laugh. Taking her arm masterfully in his, he looked down upon her teasingly.

"The lady lion-tamer mustn't mind a scratch or two, especially in the beginning, before the animals learn how to behave nicely." He mocked, but the light in his eyes was tender.

Annoyed and amused, Anne laughed in spite of herself.

"*Touchée*," she admitted gaily, "I see the cub is developing teeth and a mane, and I'd better look out for myself."

Alexis tightened her arm against his side. He emitted a low, but ferocious growl. With a laugh and a delicate shiver, she freed herself deftly and ran up the cottage steps.

"Why, lunch isn't ready after all——" she commenced, and then stopped short, for finger on lips, like a sibyl, Regina stood in the doorway and pointed mysteriously towards the end of the porch.

Astonished and amused, Anne's eyes followed the melodramatic finger. At the end of the verandah sat a small limp figure. What a bore, who could it possibly be? She had not given her address to a soul, and not even her mail was being forwarded. Couldn't people ever leave one alone?

But she moved forward graciously as usual.

The small figure rose at her approach. A pale face, a pair of enormous haunted eyes, confronted Anne. An inexplicable spasm contracted Anne's heart. She concealed sudden apprehension beneath a formal nod, and waited for the other to speak.

The girl commenced timidly.

"Is this Mrs. Schuyler?" she inquired in a low, uneven voice. The soft brown eyes met Anne's. "I came to——" then she stopped short, with a breathless gasp. Her glance had swept beyond Anne and lighted upon Alexis, just as he stepped on to the porch.

A sudden flush beautified the wan little face.

"Alexis!" she cried and brushed past Anne tempestuously.

"Alexis," she repeated. "I had to come. Please forgive me!"

"Claire!" Alexis gazed at her stormily.

She approached him pleadingly. "Is that all you have to say to me, Alexis?"

"What do you expect me to say?" he braced himself visibly, "except that I am speechless with

surprise?"

Drawing forward a porch chair, he motioned her toward it. "Won't you sit down? It is a long journey from New York and you must be tired." His voice was cold with restrained anger.

Her knees bent beneath her, and she sank into the chair with a tired sigh.

"Thank you, Alexis," the small voice was pathetic.

"But I forget," Alexis added as Anne approached them rather hesitatingly, "this is my hostess, Mrs. Schuyler. Mrs. Schuyler, my wife."

The girl rose and bowed formally. Then fell back into her chair.

Anne came to her side. With quick pity, saying the first thing that came into her head. "It's a frightful trip up here, isn't it? You must be simply starving, I will order luncheon immediately."

She was about to enter the house, but Claire stopped her with a quick little gesture of refusal.

"Thank you, that is very kind. But I really couldn't eat anything—that is——" she faltered bravely. "I had a sandwich on the train."

Her pathetic attempt at dignity went to Anne's heart.

"Oh, yes, of course," she said, "and now if you will excuse me, I will leave you two alone. I'm sure you have a great deal to talk about."

With a nod and a kind little smile, she disappeared into the house.

Her perfect exit irritated Claire. With a sudden excess of pride, she turned to Alexis and looked at him coldly.

"You're very fortunate in your hostess," she said with unexpected poise. "How did you happen to meet her?"

Alexis sat down on the railing and faced his wife.

"It's a long story, Claire, but not so strange as you probably imagine. I was ill when Mrs. Schuyler found me, and she was good enough to take me in. She is a charming woman," he continued tactlessly. "And very *comme il faut*."

"Oh, I have no doubt about that," Claire interrupted bitterly. "Very *comme il vous faut*, I am sure." Her emphasis of the "*vous*" was both angry and insulting.

Alexis sprang to his feet with an exclamation of rage.

"How dare you insinuate such a thing, Claire?" he darted an angry glance toward the doorway. "Mrs. Schuyler is an angel!" he finished with emphasis.

Claire winced beneath the adoration in his tone.

"You love her, don't you?" she said wistfully. Her great hopeless eyes rested on his flushed face.

Completely startled, he rose to his feet and stood over her almost menacingly.

"Five minutes ago I didn't know it," he announced brutally, "it remained for you to teach me."

"I!" The cry was wrung from blanched lips.

He met her anguished eyes with insolence.

"And now, if you will be so good as to tell me what you came for," he began, "and how you discovered my whereabouts. Did the chauffeur——?"

"Oh, no. He didn't say a word. I took down the number of the car, and then, it was fairly easy for your mother to discover the rest."

"And so she sent you after me?"

She shook her head, miserably.

"Oh, no. She really didn't want me to come. But I had to. I felt I must talk to you once more. But please don't think I have come for myself, I haven't. I don't want you to come back to me if—if you don't wish to. I know you have never loved me." She paused, then continued, "It is only for your mother's sake that I am here. She is entirely broken up since your letter. Please, please." She got up and coming close to him, clasped his arm. "Please return to her! If you don't, I'm sure something dreadful will happen. I never saw her so upset in my life. She is really ill, Alexis." He withdrew his arm, but not ungently. The girl's unselfishness had touched him in spite of himself.

"I simply cannot return, Claire. My mother has dominated me too long, and my soul aches for freedom. After this I must be my own master. It's not as if she really cared for me personally. All I meant to her was my career and what it brought in!" he ended bitterly. "Tell her that is finished forever, and she will be quite satisfied to do without me. For of what use is a dry cow?"

He laughed sardonically.

Tears streaming down her face, Claire answered brokenly.

"It breaks my heart to hear you speak so about your music, you who lived for nothing else. Oh, my poor Alexis, what madness has come over you?"

He looked before him with bewildered eyes.

"It is gone, gone forever," he muttered. "Can't you see it is torturing me, too?"

His shattered look lurked so near to madness that once more Claire forgot herself. She started up with a cry and threw her arms about him.

"Oh, Alexis, don't give up like that. Go back. Try once more. If you find yourself again in your old surroundings, it may all return to you. I'm sure you will be able to come to some arrangement with your mother, which will leave you more independent, and as for me I promise to do anything you ask. If it will make you happier, and make you feel less tied, I'll go away somewhere, and you need never see me again!"

A cry of pity broke from his lips. He placed her back in her chair. "Poor little Claire, it hurts to hear you talk like that. Did you think it was you who had driven me from home? Why, I shall remember your affection and sweetness always."

A flash of joy irradiated her face as he spoke. He continued with an effort.

"But even you, whom I have always loved as a little sister," he emphasized the last word, "even you couldn't bring me home. Do you understand, Claire?"

She nodded slowly. Her pallor, if possible, increased.

"Do you wish a separation?" she asked quietly.

His heart contracted at her lifeless tone. He evaded her eyes.

"Yes, Claire. I think it would be best. I must be free. And you'll admit our marriage was rather a farce, wasn't it?" He tried to speak lightly, but the effort was palpable even to Claire.

"I didn't know that it was, but perhaps you are right," she assented with a sort of deathly quiet. Her veins seemed to be suddenly sucked dry of blood, her limbs became reed-like. After a dragging moment she spoke. Her mouth was dry, and it was difficult to enunciate.

"It must be time to go back to the station," she said somewhat thickly. "My taxi is waiting around at the back of the house. Will you please call it, Alexis?"

"But you can't go like this, without talking things over. Besides, you're not fit to go back yet. You look done up. You ought really to spend the night here!" His tone was full of compunction.

The words sent a quick revulsion through her. An indignant strength flowed through her weakened limbs. She rose to her feet almost violently.

"Oh no, Alexis. You can't mean what you are saying. I must return at once. I couldn't bear to stay another minute. If there's anything to talk over, any arrangements to make, you can write me. Please, please call my car at once!"

But Alexis still hesitated.

"I do not want to part in anger and I can't bear to have you not understand——" he glanced deprecatingly towards the house.

She forced herself to smile at him valiantly.

"It is all right, Alexis. I quite understand. She is both good and lovely." She faltered pitifully. "Be happy if you can. I want you to be!"

She held out a tiny, trembling hand and he kissed it with affection and regret.

A moment more, and the dust from her taxi rose in a white cloud between the gleaming valley and his smarting eyes.

CHAPTER VI

DARK DESPAIR

It was a six mile drive to the station. Cleaving to the lip of the precipice, the road wound into the cup of the valley, where toy-like houses gleamed white from out checkered fields, and the serpentine river writhed sinuously.

Heedless of stones and ruts, Claire's taxi swayed recklessly onward. Wan, drawn, she huddled in the back seat, clinging mechanically whenever a bump threatened to precipitate her into the ravine below. Clinging mechanically and instinctively only, for lurking destruction held no terror now. Indeed, had she been conscious of the dangerous opportunity, she would probably have permitted herself to be flung to death several hundred feet below.

But she was as impervious to her peril as to the beauty about her. And every turn of the road revealed the valley in a new vista. Unseen hills and forests emerged magically, casting gorgeous patches of purple shadow before them. Incense of balsam and fir rose to the heavens in heady draughts like distilled sunshine. But Claire, swathed in her garment of misery, saw, felt nothing.

With Alexis lost to her forever, life offered a terrifying nothingness. She realized perhaps for the first time what he had meant to her ever since she could remember. Without him, existence would be a nightmare of emptiness, and yet with every revolution of the wheels she was leaving him further and further behind, progressing into the wintry region of exile where lay her bleak future. And her days and years had been so filled with his presence that it was almost impossible for her to believe that this could be so. It was as if some vital organ had been torn out of her living body and she was expected to go on without it. It was humanly impossible! In another moment she must speak to the driver, tell him to turn back up the mountain before it was too late. Back to Alexis and the beautiful, hateful woman, whom he had grown to love—this superior goddess, this Brunhilde of burnished tresses, who would have it all her own way on her mountain top, above the clouds, while she herself rode down into the dark valley.

But she could not bring herself to utter the necessary word. And she knew that it would never be spoken, trifle as she might with the illusion. The unalterable had occurred. She would make no further effort to mend the shattered pieces.

But how to face the lacerated future? To resume a negative existence with a contemptuous aunt who had never loved her and whom she had failed, would be beyond bearing. To accept her charity and Alexis' had not been difficult before because she had made herself indispensable, and she knew that she had more than earned her keep. Besides, she had been Alexis' only companion in his leisure moments and he had depended upon her more than anyone realized. But everything was changed. To continue to eat his bread and salt would be unspeakable now that he loved another woman. She had not only failed miserably as a wife, but he loved another woman.

Looking blindly into the forest on either side, Claire repeated the words to herself below her breath. "He loves another woman." They dinned into her soul with a persistency that maddened, with the relentless monotony of the drop of water which tortures the Chinese criminal. She crouched further back into the seat and covered her ears. If the repetition continued much longer, she would surely go mad, if she had not done so already. The wheels took up the rhythm and creaked it mockingly. As they rattled over the wooden bridge and entered the village it rose to a hoarse shout. Then with a jerk, stopped as suddenly and ominously as it had commenced.

Claire looked up startled, and saw they were at the station. The New York train was already there, snorting impatiently. She came to her senses with a bound, paid her driver, got aboard the Pullman and in less than a minute was leaving the country station and Alexis, as she told herself, forever.

Numbed by fatigue and suffering, the trip soon became a nightmare of swift darkness. Heavy stupor descended upon her. It was not until hours later, when skirting along the shores of the Hudson, that she emerged to full consciousness. Night had already fallen and the river heaved black and silver, like a huge snake beneath the pale light of the stars. They were stopping at a station near the water's edge, and as Claire peered out of the window, there came to her a violent temptation to run down the corridor and leap out into the inky, rippleless, depths. Why not? It would be the best thing that could happen for everybody as well as for herself.

Life was hateful, bitter, terrifying. Here was, if not rest and peace, at least cessation of agony. Her aunt would hardly feel the difference and as for Alexis? He would be free to marry again, and this time not blunderingly, like a dazed unhappy child, but with his senses awakened, and for love. A lump stabbed her in the throat like a dagger-thrust. She staggered to her feet and started to lurch out into the aisle. There came a sudden roaring as of a high wind and darkness fell upon her.

When consciousness returned, the train was entering the Grand Central station. Life still clung heavily upon her weary soul, but she was too torn, too utterly distraught to think of any new means of self-destruction. She took a taxi to the apartment in 59th Street and with the connivance of Ito gained her room without her aunt's knowledge. Welcomed rapturously by the disconsolate Bébé, she fell upon the bed fully clothed, and into the deep, dreamless, sleep of utter exhaustion.

She awakened towards morning, shocked into consciousness by the upward surge of a hitherto suppressed and unbelievable fear. Could it be possible that the uneasy suspicion which had vaguely disturbed her for weeks, and which she had entirely forgotten in the last twenty-four hours, was to be realized after all? That would indeed be the climax of irony. But it seemed to be the only explanation of the physical state through which she was struggling. Nerves and anxiety might account for general malaise and headaches. Fatigue and an empty stomach for the faint on the train, but that was not the first time she had lost consciousness in the last three months, and she had other reasons besides to fear the worst. The worst! To think that it should have to be called that, when it should have proved so

beautiful. To be the mother of Alexis' child, and to have to look forward to the fact with shrinking and with shame. What could be more bitterly ridiculous than that? And what would become of the baby if it lived? Unwanted, unloved, it would probably lead the same negative existence as she herself with all its joy dependent upon one being, who would undoubtedly betray it in the end. The thought brought scalding tears. Claire beat her pillow with tiny fists. It was too much! She refused to give birth to such ignominy.

With a bound, she sprang from the bed and ran across the room to the open window. Crouching upon the window seat, she gazed down, wide-eyed and trembling, to where, eleven stories below yawned the cavernous street. Her stomach turned at the sight. But creeping flesh commanded by indomitable spirit, she stumbled to her feet and stood upon the sill. However, as soon as she did so, she realized her mistake. To jump out, she would have to bend over almost double, as the opening was not sufficiently high. It would be necessary to sit and dangle her feet into the chasm. Somehow, the idea seemed terrifying. Once more mastering her shrinking body, she crumpled down upon the sill and thrust one foot and leg through the aperture. With a long shudder she closed her eyes and cautiously lowered the other leg.

For an endless moment she sat suspended between heaven and earth.

There came a feeble tug at her skirt from behind, a plaintive cry. And Claire's swooning senses were aware of interruption. With a flash of lucidity she realized that Béb  had awakened and was trying in dumb fashion to attract her attention. A new fear seized her. Suppose the little dog were to see her fall and jump out after her? She leaned back into the room perilously, and tried to push him from her. But as if he realized her purpose, he only whined more loudly and crawling up her skirts, crept around into her lap. Claire found herself gazing into the eyes of the only being who had ever loved her. Horror in her heart, she clutched the little creature to her breast. For a nightmare moment, they rocked on the rim of annihilation. Then with a groan of relinquishment, she fell back into the room.

As soon as her trembling limbs would permit, she crawled back on to the bed and lay sleepless until morning.

But the sun, although brilliant and mocking, brought counsel.

She arose and tidied herself. It was not a long process, as she had gone to bed fully dressed. Ringing for Ito, she ordered coffee and a taxi. Then in the face of his obvious disapproval, she gulped down a few swallows, ate a roll, and patting Béb  lingeringly, left the apartment.

CHAPTER VII

THE LOST GIRL

Cold rain fell in leaden streaks. Clouds, black and wind-swollen, encircled the mountain-top. A ferocious wind shrieked and whistled about the lodge like an unleashed demon.

Crouched over the fire, Alexis gazed at Anne. Relaxed, slim, on the chaise-longue by the hearth, she was looking into the flames with an inscrutable expression.

Alexis stirred uneasily.

What was she thinking of, behind those drooping lids? What inimical thought stirred beneath those silken coils which shone like burnished metal in the firelight? He sighed. Was she criticizing him for the way in which he had parted from Claire the day before yesterday? She doubtless considered him a blackguard. And was he very far removed from one, after all? Emphatically no! And yet things like this happened every day. Other men were being separated from wives whom they had once professed to cherish. Surely, there was more excuse for him? His own case was so different, he who had been practically tricked into matrimony?

Yet, ever since yesterday constraint had fallen between him and this woman, whose personality obsessed him. Constraint, of which they had never been conscious in those first feverish days of illness. It must be that Anne had become suddenly antagonistic towards him. At any rate, it was plainly to be seen that he had overstayed his welcome, that she no longer desired his presence. He must go away immediately, to-morrow, perhaps. But where? Certainly not to the cabin. A refuge at first, it had soon become a prison of maddened and inarticulate fears. To return would be unthinkable. Yet to go back to civilization would be almost equally difficult. He was so tired, so unutterably soul-weary that the very idea of having to meet people and cope with their curiosity turned him cold. He shivered and drew his breath with a hissing sound.

"What is the matter, Alexis?" Anne's tones fell upon the silence like the ringing of a bell.

He started uncontrollably.

"What did you say?"

She looked at him pityingly. His egotistical young misery at once touched and annoyed her. To-night she was a little weary, a trifle bored with both him and the situation.

"I merely asked what was the matter," she repeated gently enough. "A silly question, as it is self-evident. You have been miserable ever since yesterday. I think you regret the parting from your wife more than you realize. It has made me very unhappy, too. I hope you were not harsh, and that you said nothing final. Please forgive me for interfering!" She smiled apologetically into his glum face and held out her hand.

Bridging the distance in one stride, he bent over the proffered hand and kissed it with an intensity that took Anne off her guard.

"As if you could ever interfere!" he exclaimed forcibly. "You are an angel for bearing with me and my boorish moods! It is a debt I never can repay," he concluded rather formally.

"Nonsense," Anne laughed with less constraint. "I have done nothing. But if you insist upon an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, you can repay me by doing nothing rash just at present. You see I worry about you terribly, don't I?" She smiled up at him with disengaging frankness.

"You are so good, so wise." He sat down upon the floor at her feet. "I am not worth all your trouble." He tried unsuccessfully to regain possession of her hand.

"Indeed you are," she interposed, "and even if you were not, your art is!" she added significantly.

His eyes, which had been fixed worshippingly on her face, hardened.

"My art! And I flattered myself that you took a personal interest in me. You're just like the others, after all!"

He rose angrily, and began to pace up and down the room.

Both hurt and amused, she watched him with an indulgent smile.

"It is naturally the artist in you which interests me the most," she replied quietly. "Anything further would be an impertinence," she finished rather cruelly.

The furious pacing stopped. He glared down upon her.

"Then you are impertinent!" he cried brutally. "For unless you are a consummate actress, you are beginning to care for me, me personally, more than for any fiddling I ever have or am ever likely to do!"

A marble goddess looked suddenly forth from Anne's stony face.

"If you were not ill, and only a boy, I would send you away for saying that!" Her voice was metallic.

The icy tones congealed his blood. In an excess of remorse, he fell down at her feet and hid his face on the chaise-longue.

"Forgive me," he muttered. "But if you only knew how much it means to have someone take an interest in me outside of my music! To feel that I myself mean something to someone! My music has always been first with everyone. I have been like a rich man's son, who is afraid to believe that anyone cares for anything except his millions."

Raising his face, he looked pleadingly into her eyes. His misery melted her heart, but her tone remained cold.

"I think you are forgetting your wife," she said quietly. "Surely you cannot believe that your music came first with her!"

He evaded her reproachful gaze.

"Poor Claire, yes she did care!" His voice was at once reassured and remorseful.

Anne smiled down upon him ironically. The colossal egotism of these geniuses! But her voice was unruffled as she proceeded.

"Does care, you mean! Alexis, look at me." She sat up and took his reluctant face into her hands. "I

want you to go back to Claire. I want you to make up to her for all your past unkindness. Will you do it to please me?"

He jerked his head away violently and rose to his feet.

"No, ten thousand times no," he cried. "Does a prisoner ever return to his dungeon? How can you ask such a thing? It is only because you are tired of me. Want to get rid of me. Well, I am going any time you say. This minute, if you wish!"

She shook her head with a low laugh.

"What, in all this rain?" she asked, as a sudden gust of wind tore at the windows. "You are so excitable, my poor Alexis! Come, you know I don't want you to go. I shall miss you sadly. But I can't help thinking how much happier you might be if you only would." She looked wistfully into the angry face.

He returned her glance with scorn.

"Happier? There's no such thing as happiness. At least for me; I'm not so exacting as to demand it! But at least I can be free, and I shall!"

"There is nothing to prevent you, poor Alexis," she replied gently.

He hung his head and the light suddenly went out of his face.

"You are offended with me? I don't blame you——" his voice was low and broken. "I suppose this is good-bye?"

A new pain bit into Anne's heart.

"Oh no, Alexis, no! How can you say so?" she broke in contritely. "If you don't feel you can go back to the others"—she hesitated uncertainly for a moment, "you may remain here with me. I have taken the lodge until the first of November. There still remain almost ten days. Do you think you could bear it?"

She looked at him less frankly. Her flush and the new uncertainty of her voice enraptured Alexis.

"Anne, Anne," he cried impetuously, calling her by her name for the first time. "Why, being with you is the only happiness I have ever had! It was the terrible fear of losing it that has upset me so tonight."

His face was radiant. In another moment, Anne feared he might become demonstrative. With a slight flutter of regret and excitement, she rose and ran to the piano.

"I insist upon playing!" She ran her fingers over the keys lightly, avoiding his tortured expression. "I've restrained myself for ten days on your account, and now that it is decided you are remaining, I refuse to go without my piano any longer! Besides, I simply must drown out this wind if I can. It is getting on my nerves!"

Too astonished to remonstrate, slightly sick at his stomach, Alexis fell into the nearest chair and steeled himself to listen. From the corner of her eye, Anne admired his unexpected control. Nothing in his polite attitude betrayed the nervous torture she knew he was undergoing. But she chose to ignore it.

She broke into one of Chopin's preludes and continued to watch him furtively. His pallor turned a sickly gray. Small beads of moisture stood out upon his forehead. The clenched hands, the twisted lips, made Anne feel like an executioner. But still she continued playing. And as she had hoped, the ruse proved successful.

After a few minutes, the nervous hands relaxed. A smile loosened the tension of his lips. For a while he listened in seeming content. Then evidently he could contain himself no longer. Still pale, but no longer in agony, he was obviously in the throes of a new and more vital emotion.

With an awakened, exultant expression, he sprang out of the chair and striding over behind her, swept her off the piano stool and into the armchair.

"Very good indeed!" he cried with unconscious condescension. "But let me show you how it ought to be done."

He gave the stool a professional twist or two, and sat down and commenced to play. Slightly crestfallen, Anne composed herself to listen.

He took up the prelude where she had left off.

She had not known that he had it in him. Acknowledged master of the violin, he was a pianist of undoubted technique and power as well. A month ago, such a performance from a mere boy would have racked and humiliated, but now it was sheer, unadulterated, pleasure.

"Why didn't you tell me you could play the piano like that?" she exclaimed almost peevishly.

He wheeled about on the piano-stool and smiled at her rather sheepishly.

"I can't," he said simply. "It is merely a side issue, a relaxation."

Anne came and stood beside him.

"I could slap you!" she retorted with mock anger. "The idea of calling a talent like that a side issue! Why you could make a career for yourself as a pianist if you wished."

He laughed almost light-heartedly.

"Oh no, you are making too much allowance for the country piano. I'm afraid the small career I've had already will have to last me the rest of my life!"

Anne sighed.

"And you want me to believe that you've forgotten how to play the violin after this exhibition?" she asked crossly.

He gave her a startled look.

"You think I've been trying to deceive you? You believe that of me? Oh Anne!" he cried in anguished tones.

She leaned over him remorsefully and patted the weary-looking shoulder.

"Poor Alexis," she murmured. "I didn't mean to hurt you! Of course I know you wouldn't deceive me intentionally."

He glanced up at her through grateful tears.

"Poor useless Alexis," he replied under his breath, "who cumber the earth with his wasteful presence. What are you going to do with him?" His eyes held the plaintive appeal of a lost child.

Anne moved away hastily.

"Spank him and send him to bed," she laughed, uneasy at his tone.

A sudden and more angry blast shook the house. Anne went to the window and drew up the shade. She looked out into the uproarious night. The rain beat against the panes like waves washing over a porthole. Anne shivered.

"I had almost forgotten the storm while you were playing, hadn't you? Come, see how weirdly the trees are behaving!"

He strolled up behind her and they stood, looking out into the blackness. Beaten beneath leaden shafts of rain, torn by a diabolic wind, the placid forest had become an inferno of twisting branches. Tossing limbs writhed in seeming agony under each shrieking gust.

"They look like a company of maddened demons," Anne shuddered and pulled down the shade. "I could almost believe it is they and not the wind, which whistle and scream. It reminds one of a witch's Sabbath!"

She went to the table, gathered up a book or two, and prepared to go upstairs, when the brusque whirr of the telephone stopped her.

"What can that be?" she cried completely startled. She ran across the room and took down the receiver.

"Yes, this is Mrs. Schuyler. Who is this? Oh—a telegram?"

As she waited for the message, she encountered Alexis' eyes with a startled inquiry in her own.

"It is for you, Alexis," she whispered. She held out the receiver and moved aside. He backed away with nervous horror.

"Please take the message for me, Anne!"

She nodded curtly and resumed her listening. A moment passed before she spoke.

"Oh, yes, I'm responsible," she said shortly, evidently in answer to some remonstrance from the other end. "You may give me the message quite safely. I'll write it down word for word."

She held out an imperious hand. Alexis rushed across the room to the desk, secured pencil and paper and prepared to write at her dictation. When she spoke her voice seemed strangely flat and monotonous.

"Claire missing since yesterday morning. Traced to St. Patrick's by Ito. Then clue lost.
Fear worst. Return immediately.

Your Mother"

Anne replaced the receiver in silence and she and Alexis looked into each other's faces.

"You must go back at once," she whispered finally.

"And leave you?" he exclaimed huskily. "Never! Besides I don't believe a word. It is merely a hoax, a clever trick of my mother's to get me back into her clutches. She's quite capable of it! But she can't fool me so easily. I'll not go!"

Anne met his wild young eyes with something akin to horror.

"Oh no, Alexis, you are deceiving yourself! This message rings only too true, and I should never forgive myself if I didn't urge you to go, especially after what happened yesterday."

He shook his head stubbornly.

"You don't know my mother!"

She placed her hand upon his arm with an urgent gesture.

"Alexis, you are behaving like a spoiled child! You would never forgive yourself if something happened to Claire because of you. The least you can do is to return immediately. If it should turn out to be a hoax, which is unbelievable, why you can come back again. Nobody can force you to stay, you know!"

At her appeal, a sudden sense of shame flooded him. He nodded his head in bitter acquiescence.

"Yes, I suppose I must go," he said slowly. "But how can I leave you, how can I live without you?" His eyes devoured her. She turned away to hide sudden tears.

"Hush, Alexis, you must not think of yourself now. Remember poor Claire. Come, you must be brave." Her voice was gentle.

"You make me ashamed!" he cried. "But I love you so. I don't know what would become of me if I should have to lose you, Anne!"

He raised her hands to his lips and kissed them over and over.

"Promise that you will not forsake me, that you will let me remain your friend."

Tears trembling on her lids, she looked down upon his bent head.

"I promise," she murmured.

With a smothered cry he released her. He turned his back abruptly and strode across the room.

"What time does the early train leave?" he inquired huskily from the doorway.

"At six, I believe," responded Anne faintly. "Regina will pack for you and of course Howard will drive you down to the village," she continued more firmly.

"Thank you."

His despairing eyes caught the regret in hers.

"You will let me hear from you?" his voice was full of suppressed suffering.

"Of course," she replied. "Please telegraph if there is any news. I'll be going down myself in a few days probably. It is becoming rather cheerless here now." She cast a nervous glance towards the windows against which the rain continued to pound relentlessly.

Her unconcealed trouble kindled a light in Alexis' eyes. "She is beginning to love me," he thought. A sense of fear and joy permeated him, but he continued speaking calmly.

"I shall say good-bye to-night, then, so as not to disturb you so early in the morning. Good-bye, Anne—thank you." His voice broke. He turned and escaped up the stairs.

Pale, a little wistful, Anne watched the boyish figure disappear around the landing.

CHAPTER VIII

MORTAL SIN

Joy irradiating the small, wan features, Claire looked up into Alexis' face. At the pathetic bewilderment in her eyes, a spasm of contrition shot through him. He sat down beside the bed and took her hand in his.

Dim and bare, the hospital room was stereotyped but comfortable. However, it struck a chill to Alexis' heart and he shuddered a little, as he returned the feeble pressure of the cold fingers.

"Poor Claire, what a horrible time you've had!" he whispered.

She shook her head and smiled up at him faintly.

"Oh, no, Alexis, it might have been so much worse. Everybody has been so good to me here. The sisters are wonderful!" Her eyes left his face for a moment and travelled to the window where a nun was sitting. The flaring coif, the white kerchief, framed a beautiful serenity and Claire sighed as her gaze rested upon the folded hands. Would such peace ever be hers? she wondered enviously. Alexis' eyes, following hers, flashed sudden distaste. To him the serenity spelt stupidity; the folded hands, laziness. Hatred of all dogma had obsessed him since childhood, and was still one of the few prejudices which had survived his habitual indifference. It had always proved a bone of contention between him and Claire, who during a three-year sojourn in a French convent, had become an ardent, if somewhat spasmodic, convert.

Swift as was the expression of antagonism, Claire perceived it. She clasped his fingers nervously and sought to distract his attention.

"But, Alexis, how did you ever find me? You must think I am crazy not to have asked you immediately!"

He smiled down upon her.

"Oh no, I knew you would come to it eventually," he paused.

"Well, how did you?" she insisted. "You see I didn't really come to myself until yesterday, and early this morning when I told them to notify Aunt, they said that my family already knew where I was and had ordered me to be put in a private room. I was in the ward before." She looked at him gravely.

Alexis regarded her with pity.

"Yes, poor little girl, I know. It must have been awful. I never can forgive myself for all you've suffered." He stooped suddenly and kissed her on the cheek.

Tears streaming down her face, she turned her head away.

"You don't have to do that, Alexis," she whispered.

His lips salty with her tears, he continued somewhat unsteadily.

"Do you want to know how I found you, little cousin? It was really very simple although long drawn out. Ito watched you from the window as you left the house. He saw you enter a taxi. (Something odd in your appearance and manner had frightened him. Let me see, that was three days ago, wasn't it?)"

She nodded mutely, and he continued.

"When you didn't arrive home that night, he called up the taxi company and they traced you to the church door. Knowing your religious proclivities," they smiled tremulously at each other, "I interviewed several of the priests and finally found the one to whom you had confessed."

"That must have been horrible!" Claire interrupted with forced levity. A growing fear was in her eyes. "What did he tell you?" She sat up in bed. A deep flush suddenly replaced her former pallor.

Her agonized embarrassment did not escape Alexis. He broke in quickly, "Nothing at all, of course. Secrecy of the confessional and all that, you know."

She collapsed upon the pillows. Disregarding her obvious agitation, Alexis went on quietly.

"He merely told me that you seemed ill. That perhaps you had fainted in the street and been taken to some hospital. I thought it an excellent suggestion, and after calling up about four or five hospitals and describing you and your clothes (you can thank Ito for that—he knew what you had on to the last detail), we finally succeeded in discovering you here. That is all." Releasing her hand, which he had held in his all this time, he patted it gently.

She looked up into his face with grateful eyes.

"Oh Alexis, how good of you to take so much trouble for me. How can I ever thank you?"

"It wasn't good of me, and you know it. I've been a brute all along. But if you want to please me you must take care of yourself. As soon as you are able to leave the hospital and go back to the apartment you must take one of these sisters home with you and keep her as long as necessary. But I will consult the doctor about that," he added with a business-like air, which contrasted oddly with his usual lack of responsibility.

Claire sat up suddenly and clasped his arm.

"That won't be necessary at all. Please don't consult the doctor about me. I'm perfectly well, only a little tired and not quite myself since—since you went to the sanitarium. Now that you are all right, I shall pick up quickly and—Alexis," she continued bravely, "whenever you want the separation you can have it, of course!" She spoke in a low voice so that the nun might not hear.

He flushed painfully.

"We won't think about that now, Claire. I want you to get well before we decide upon anything. Who knows, we may change our minds?" he added with a weak desire to please her.

She winced. When she replied her voice was still low, but almost hard.

"Please don't try to deceive me, Alexis. I know you too well. You are sorry for me now. But you don't love me any more than you did a week ago. I am willing to go back to your mother if you desire it. You are my husband and I must obey you. But I beg of you not to pretend—that is more than I can bear!" With a stifled sob she fell back upon the pillow.

Torn with shame and pity, Alexis started to speak, but before he could say a word, the sister rose

from her seat in the window and approached the bed.

"I'm afraid you are exciting my patient," she said pleasantly.

Alexis met her gentle gaze with a guilty expression.

"I'm afraid I am, but I didn't mean to," he stammered contritely. "Perhaps I'd better go?"

The sister nodded.

"It would be best, but I'll give you a minute or two to say goodbye in," she added with a lenient smile. The young couple interested her, and her old maid's heart was gripped by their very evident problem. With punctilious courtesy, she turned and walked back to the window.

Alexis knelt quickly beside the bed and laid his face against Claire's head. His lips upon the thick, black hair, he whispered in the averted ear.

"Can you ever forgive me, Claire? I must have been born an utter cad. I just can't seem to help it!"

She turned her face towards him indignantly and put her hand upon his lips.

"Don't say such a thing," she murmured beneath her breath, but with startling intensity. "You are Alexis, and that is all I ask. And now go, my dear, I am tired."

She pushed him away feebly. He rose to his feet and kissed remorsefully the little hand she extended.

"I am not fit to live!" he exclaimed, unconsciously expounding man's most stereotyped phrase, and filling her woman's soul thereby with the usual illogical pity.

When he had left and the nun had gone to her supper, she broke down completely. Poor Alexis, poor Claire, she thought bitterly, into what a miserable tangle they had blundered. And what a wretched fool she herself had been. Such a beautiful bond had existed between them, and in her greedy effort to draw it still closer, she had snapped it asunder. For her aunt, the real instigator of it all, she had scarcely a thought of blame. Even if she had known the entire truth, she probably would not have reproached her. Her instinct told her that it was her own blissful acquiescence by which she had been betrayed. She accepted her responsibility very simply and without thought of contradiction.

It was with this idea uppermost in her mind that she had gone to St. Patrick's, instead of her own little chapel, in the hope of finding a priest to whom she would not have to reveal her identity. It had been easy enough to find him and to recount her simple tragedy as briefly as possible. But the verdict had not been the one for which she had hoped, although the adviser had proved more gentle and more wise than the average haphazard priest upon whom she and her problem might have fallen. And she had kept nothing back, from the casual nature of the marriage itself, to the unforeseen but natural and physical consequences buried deep within her body. Even when she came to the pitiful attempt at suicide she had drawn forth scarcely a reproach from the other side of the confessional. The old man had listened to similar stories so often. His heart had been bruised by a thousand vicarious sorrows. It was not until she hinted at her desire for escape that he raised a protest. She had whispered brokenly of Alexis' love for another woman and had ventured to ask if it wouldn't be possible for the church to grant a divorce, or even to annul the marriage. The old man had told her very sternly that that would be a sin almost as mortal as suicide, in the face of the life which she was carrying. Did she want to add another fatherless waif to the unnamed legions already encumbering the world? Her duty was to the new life, to make its inception as happy as possible, and through it to bring her mistaken young husband back into the pathway of duty. At those last words, Claire recalled that she had almost smiled. Alexis and the pathway of duty had seemed so ludicrously unakin, somehow! No, the only thing to do, the priest had continued somewhat droningly, was to take up her life again as she had left it. If her husband did not wish to live with her, that was not her fault. Probably when the child was born, he would have a change of heart, etc., etc.

Only partly convinced, but too weary to resist the age-old arguments, she had left the confessional with a half-formulated resolve of drifting for a while and seeing whether time might not alter the situation.

But out on the church steps the brilliant sunshine seemed to pierce into her brain. She had been seized with familiar giddiness. A merciful veil of blackness suddenly obscured her vision, and she knew no more until yesterday afternoon when she had awakened to find herself in a hospital ward.

It had been a rather horrifying sensation to lose an entire day and night out of existence. To suddenly discover oneself in the public ward of a great hospital! A horror mitigated by the kindness of the sisters and the concern of the visiting young doctor, who had taken it for granted that Claire had realized the exact nature of her condition.

Since then, before seeing Alexis, she had had time to think. She had lain awake all night over her problem. In spite of the frightful wrench to spirit and pride, she had come to the same inevitable conclusion as the day before. Because of the child that was coming she would sacrifice her own desires and return to Alexis' mother. However, she allowed herself one reservation, of which she knew the old priest would not approve, but to which pride obstinately clung. Neither Alexis nor his mother should be told of her "hopes" as the sister so chastely put it, until it was no longer possible to conceal it from anyone. As soon as she heard that Alexis was coming to the hospital, she had made both the doctor and the nurse promise solemnly not to divulge her secret. A request acceded to with small reluctance, as similar whims constantly arose within their province.

How devoutly she hoped they were keeping their word!

For probably at this very moment Alexis was interviewing the doctor on her behalf and making arrangements for the return to the apartment. That return which she dreaded from the bottom of her soul. That apartment where her aunt, Mme. Petrovskoy held sway and was waiting to encompass her with the cold and bland silence which was hers habitually, and which, characteristically, she had not broken since Claire's disappearance.

She had not dared to ask Alexis if he would be there, too. She hardly knew whether she desired it. An appalling weariness warned her that she would be unable to cope with the emotions his presence involved. Yet without him life was void, the future a terrifying blank.

Too spent for tears, she turned her leaden body and burying her face against the pillow, sank into a lethargy as deep and almost as peaceful as the elusive death which had failed her.

YOUTH'S TEMPEST

Anne looked up into the Marchese's face with a quizzical smile. Beneath the staccato uproar of piano and laughter his voice flowed liquid and unbroken. Interesting and even thrilling as were his recent adventures, somehow his account lacked the usual fire. It was difficult to focus her attention. The fervid charm of their intercourse seemed to have vanished. Anne's smile stiffened upon her lips. Her eyes wandered rather vaguely about the crowded room.

It was the usual *olla podrida* of mixed professions and nationalities that had gathered in her drawing room for the last four or five years. One or two genuine artists and musicians, a writer of indubitable distinction, an actress of greater renown than ability, several clever pretenders, and the man at her side, whose fame as an archæologist, stood undisputed, and whose dignity and charm were a byword on two continents. A man whose friendship had gratified her for years and whose attentions had more than satisfied a fastidious and pampered vanity.

But somehow, he failed to thrill her to-night. His virile and rather grave personality was overshadowed by one weaker, yet more compelling. Between her and the dark, high-bred face, intruded a pale, sensitive silhouette; the memory of burning, youthful words. Not accustomed to float upon the tide of emotions, Anne was conscious of a bewildered self-contempt.

With a determined effort she shepherded her truant thoughts and turned to the Marchese just as the boy at the piano had banged the last smashing cord of a Sowerby Medley.

"Rather relentless, wasn't it?" she laughed above the raucous applause.

"Blasphemy, pure and simple," shuddered the Marchese. "Like a visit to the dentist. The buzzer, you know?" He rolled his r's and waved a graphic hand. "It sets my teeth on edge completely. How can you bear it, *carissima*?"

She laughed again.

"It's rather amusing, don't you think? Poor Vittorio, are you so old-fashioned as to enjoy a perpetual *Celeste Aïda*?"

"Yes, thank God," he exclaimed fervently. "Do you suppose Orpheus would ever have rescued his Eurydice by playing jazz? No, no, the old guardian beasts were too artistic for that!"

She waved her fan gaily.

"But nowadays we don't even believe in Hades!"

"Ah, but it is always Paradise when with you, *Cara Anna*," he murmured somewhat bromidically.

She looked up into his face.

"You are always so good, Vittorio! I—I'm afraid I don't deserve it." She paled a little beneath the earnest gaze of the red-brown eyes.

He laughed indulgently beneath his breath.

"How is that, don't deserve it? But what has entered into you, dear lady, since your return from the mountain? Have you met a god that you are so uncharacteristically humble?"

Failing to meet her eyes, his own became suddenly troubled. Had Anne perhaps indeed received the *coup de foudre* which he had been dreading all these years?

"Do fallen gods dwell upon the mountain-tops?" There was a trace of uncertainty in Anne's smile. Her eyes grew misty as the pale obsessive silhouette rose once more between them. "And if I had?" she challenged.

His lids veiled sudden apprehension.

"Met a fallen god?" he inquired lightly.

She nodded, meeting his searching gaze with an innocent stare.

"Then, unconquered lady, beware!" he shook a solemn finger, not at all reassured by the innocent stare. Experience had taught him that even the best of women lie when occasion demands it. "The fallen god is the most dangerous of all. His halo may be crooked, but it dazzles. His poor, stumbling feet of clay inspire that pity which poets claim is akin to love."

He finished with a mock heroic flourish. They both laughed aloud.

"Don't be niggards. Share the joke," came a husky drawl from behind them, as the long, but prodigious, Ellen Barnes sank into the nearest chair. An actress of the foremost rank, of greater personal than artistic appeal, her ample shoulders had assumed the regal mantle of Broadway. Her reign undisputed, her manner was more royal than the queen's.

The Marchese smiled upon the intruder suavely. He thought her acting execrable, and knew she would be hissed off any worth-while French or Italian stage, but her regular, well-nourished beauty was reposeful, her languid air tickled his humor.

"The Marchese was discussing feet," said Anne slyly, rather relieved at the interruption.

The other woman stared incredulously.

"Feet? Metrical or unpoetic like mine?" she threw out a large, but shapely foot, and regarded it with satisfaction.

"Ellen, your vanity is incorrigible!" laughed Anne lightly as she rose. "But if you promise to be a good girl and not corrupt the Marchese I'll trust you alone with him for a while. They are waving to me from the piano."

The Marchese surveyed her retreat with a whimsical smile.

"I am very much frightened," he said, turning towards the delighted Ellen, who sprawled largely nonchalant upon her cushions. "Was it not Hedda Gabler to-night?"

"Oh yes, a revival," exclaimed Ellen eagerly. "Do you think the part suits me?"

The Marchese's reply was more than satisfactory. But his eyes followed the figure of the other woman.

Her apple green dress, clinging closely about her, Anne was crossing the room. They will want me to

dance, I suppose, she thought, looking about her with dissatisfaction. She felt suddenly un-at-home, almost ill at ease. The familiar surroundings still appealed with the claim of long association. The *tempera* walls still soothed, the carved Florentine furniture had lost no dignity, but somehow tonight the carefully chosen austerity rang false. Or was it merely that she was bored? Yes, bored almost to tears by the deafening prattle of the puppets she had gathered together? Yes, that was it. Why had she never sensed their incongruity so strongly before?

She approached the multi-colored group at the piano and looked down into the face of the boy seated at the keyboard. Brilliant, degenerate, his playing just escaped the professional. As he returned her gaze, something wistful and defiant within the tired eyes suddenly struck at Anne's heart. Something that seemed to cry: "there is a devil within me, but I did not put him there. Besides, who cares?"

Anne leaned over him. Her emerald earrings tinkled gaily in his face. A faint perfume swept his facile senses.

"How goes it, Gerald?" she said quietly.

"Oh, life's a dirge, as usual." A smile painted upon the wistfulness, he flung back his head and with distended nostrils seemed to inhale her into his consciousness. Then springing up, he held out his arms.

"Let us drown sorrow in a dance," he begged. Pushing a rather naked and wild-eyed young woman into his seat he commanded her to play. "A waltz, anything so long as it is immediate!"

With a toss of the bobbed-head and a mechanical grab at a recalcitrant shoulder-strap, the girl broke into a grotesque *cancan*.

Rather wearily, Anne permitted herself to be swept into Gerald's arms. Joined by six or seven other couples they wheeled around the room, like a flock of gaily-feathered pigeons.

Anne felt herself studied by the weary young eyes.

"What is the matter?" she said a little peevishly. "Have you discovered a wrinkle?"

The boy pressed her to him with spasmodic strength. She marvelled at the force of the doll-like creature, and at herself for ever having been, even momentarily, swayed by his puerile passion.

"Don't be foolish, Gerald," she added crossly, as he continued to crush her against him. The music stopped with a staccato crash. They circled to a finish near the alcove where Ellen Barnes and the Marchese were bolstering a dwindling conversation by forced inanities.

Anne accepted the Marchese's chair with gratitude. Vittorio was a real man and a relief after the hectic Gerald. She looked up at the latter with a rather tired smile.

"Do get yourself a drink, Gerald, you look so hot. Thompson is serving them in the library, I believe. You may bring me one, too, if you like," she added to mitigate the rather abrupt dismissal. Personally, she loathed cocktails.

Ellen was looking almost animated.

"The Marchese has been showing me a chain he dug up somewhere in Persia," she drawled between puffs of a scented cigarette. "He tells me I may wear it in my next play, which is taken from the Arabian nights or the Bible, I never can remember exactly which. At any rate, it's antique and oriental!"

She held the chain up for Anne's approval. It was of hammered gold, studded at intervals with monstrous uncut turquoise. A flush rising in her pale face, Anne fingered it lovingly.

"How unbelievably beautiful," she murmured, almost reproachfully. What could have come over Vittorio? He did not usually juggle his treasures promiscuously. Could he have become infatuated with Ellen? "I'm sure it must have a story. Do tell it to us, Vittorio."

He met her uncertain smile with concealed amusement. How could he tell her how openly the woman had angled for the bauble?

"It's rather a long story, I'm afraid," he commenced with his usual amiability. "However, if you command——"

But at this moment Gerald appeared with a small tray of cocktails and as they helped themselves the doorbell pealed shrilly.

A glass raised halfway to her lips, Anne paused almost imperceptibly, while the butler strode solemnly down the hall, and opening the street door, indulged in a prolonged but discreet parley.

Gerald noted Anne's abstraction with malicious curiosity.

"Is any of the gang missing?" he said. "Shall I go and see who it is, Anne?"

But Anne had risen. With a disconcerting little smile she swept by him; as he started to follow she looked back over her shoulder and laughed softly.

"No, you can't come with me, Gerald. You mustn't be so curious! Perhaps I have a mystery in my life, who knows? At any rate, I promise to call for help if it's a burglar!"

As she swept out of the arched doorway, the boy looked after her in chagrined anger.

Heart knocking against her side, she emerged into the high narrow hall. Thompson was at the door, and as she had surmised, the tall stranger with whom he was discreetly parleying was Alexis.

Muffled in a great coat, a soft hat pulled over his eyes, he presented the appearance of a conspirator in the movies, and Anne did not wonder that Thompson had hesitated to permit him to enter. Suppressing a hysterical desire to laugh, she interposed herself between the two men.

"It's quite all right, Thompson," she said in a low voice, "you may go."

As the surprised man disappeared down the corridor, she held out her hands to Alexis. He seized and covered them with kisses.

"Be careful." A pulse hammering faintly in her throat, she drew him swiftly into the house. "The house is full of people and someone may come out here at any moment!"

He cast a hunted look about him. A sudden shriek of laughter rose shrilly above the rest.

"Isn't there any place where we can be undisturbed?" His lowering gaze rested upon her angrily. But it was the first time he had seen her in evening dress and as her beauty penetrated through his irritation, his expression melted suddenly.

"You are like an alabaster lamp!" he exclaimed. "Your skin is luminous, as if a light were glowing

from within. I think you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen!"

She gave a husky little laugh and catching hold of his hand, pulled him after her up the stairs.

"We will go to my sitting-room, which Thompson insists upon calling the 'budwar,' and Regina the *salotino*," she whispered gaily.

She led the way up the curved, stone, stairway. He followed submissively, an absent eye upon the tapestries that covered the stone walls. They entered the sitting-room at the top of the stairs and Anne closed the door firmly.

"*Enfin seuls!*" she exclaimed sinking with a comic little air into a chair before the fire. Throwing aside his hat and coat, Alexis glowered somberly down upon her.

"It is a week since we parted, and I've been starving for the sight of you," he cried with a catch in his voice. "Why didn't you let me know that you had returned?"

His agitated face reproached her. She laughed rather nervously.

"I only arrived yesterday afternoon, impatient one. Besides, I had received your telegram and knew that everything was all right. I was going to call you up to-morrow morning. But now I shan't have to, shall I?" She drew herself up briskly. "Come, don't stand there glowering at me. Sit down, tell me your news."

Wounded at her sudden change of tone, Alexis sank upon a stool at her feet. Putting his arms about his knees, he stared gloomily into the flames. "What do you want to know?" he inquired sullenly.

Anne repressed an impatient sigh.

"Tell me about Claire," she said quietly. "Will she be able to leave the hospital soon?"

"She seems to be perfectly all right, now, and expects to return home in a few days," he replied.

Anne leaned forward tensely.

"Shall you be there, Alexis?" she inquired.

He looked up into her face with utter surprise.

"I? Of course not. I've already taken an apartment on Gramercy Park, and shall probably go away as soon as my affairs are settled."

Anne nodded.

"Where are you thinking of going?" she murmured conversationally.

At her indifferent tone, he shrugged nonchalantly.

"Anywhere, nowhere! The South Sea Islands—Russia, perhaps!"

Anne nodded again.

"A little touch of Bolshevism would be akin at present," she commented drily.

He crimsoned.

"You think I'm impossible, don't you, Anne?"

Encountering his angry, pleading gaze, she laughed uncertainly.

"I think you make life impossible for yourself—and others!"

He wheeled about and faced the fire with tragic, sullen eyes.

"You are right. I'm a curse to myself and everyone else. The sooner I am out of it the better for all."

A tug of pain at her heart, Anne leaned forward and laid her hand upon his thick, blonde hair. "My dear, my poor dear," her voice was compassionate and caressing.

With a guttural cry, Alexis turned, and flinging himself at Anne's feet, buried his face in her lap.

"Don't hate me! If you do, I shall kill myself. Say you won't hate me. Say it!"

Tears welled up into Anne's eyes. Taking his face in her hands, she raised it to her own. "My poor Alexis, my poor boy!"

"Why, you are crying, you love me!" he exclaimed naïvely.

She shook her head. A faint smile traversed her quivering lips.

"I don't know. I'm afraid not."

Seizing her hands, he showered kisses into the upturned palms. "Anne, Anne, I love you."

The tremulous smile still lifting her lips, she pushed him from her, and rose to her feet.

"No, Alexis, this won't do. We must pull ourselves together, or you will have to go."

He faced her incredulously, as she leaned, pale and enigmatic, against the mantel.

"You wouldn't send me away now?"

She nodded.

"You would ruin our lives for the sake of a convention?" He strode towards her menacingly. But his melodramatic manner had stirred her dormant cynicism. She laughed.

"Poor Alexis, don't take it so seriously. We would be utterly miserable together. You know it. Come, let us be content to be friends."

She held out her hand, but he backed away angrily.

"You are heartless—cruel." He threw himself down upon the small divan before the fire, flinging his head back amongst the cushions. "You know that you are the only thing in the world that makes life worth living for me, and yet you deny yourself to me, just because you are afraid of what people will say. Of what that cackling crowd of snickerers downstairs might think of you. I thought you were bigger than that, Anne."

She looked down into the wrathful face with recovered self-possession.

"That crowd of snickerers, as you so politely call them, means very little in my life. But my own self-respect happens to mean a great deal. If you expect me to become your mistress just because you appeal to my compassion, you are doomed to disappointment! If my friendship will content you, that is another thing."

Her coldness fell upon him like a revivifying shower. The apathetic young figure sprang from the divan with a bound.

"What an ass I've made of myself! Just because you were kind, I was fool enough to imagine you loved me. I suppose it didn't seem possible that I could feel about you the way I do without any return from you. I—I think I'd better go."

"No, no, Alexis, you don't understand."

He ignored her imploring gesture, and taking up his hat and coat, started for the door. But it was

too late.

A languid footfall fell outside in the corridor. Before Anne could reach the door, it opened to admit Ellen Barnes, a rising wave of voices mounting in her wake.

With a swift movement, Anne sprang forward and closed the door behind the other woman. Standing with her back against it, she looked at Ellen with a mixture of command and appeal.

"Did you think I was never coming?" she asked. "Do go downstairs again and tell the others I'll be there directly. I'll explain later."

With a keen glance into Alexis' face, a lazy smile upon her lips, Ellen lounged into the room.

"Won't you introduce us first? Don't worry, I won't give you away!" she purred. She sat down, prepared to light a cigarette.

Anne concealed her anger beneath a casual smile.

"There's nothing to give away, as you call it, Ellen. This gentleman is calling upon me on private matters. If you will excuse us, I'll come down as soon as he has finished telling me what he came to say."

Ellen rose, a quizzical gleam in her eye.

"Sorry to have interrupted a business conference," she waved her unlighted cigarette languidly. "Since when has Mr. Petrovsky given up music for stocks and bonds? Mr. Petrovsky, won't you please become my adviser, too?"

She turned towards Alexis, good-natured mockery in her large, infantile gaze.

He stepped forward with a rueful laugh.

"I'm afraid I'm not qualified. You see, poor Mrs. Schuyler was only trying to shield me. Since—since my illness," he choked a little and then continued swiftly, "it has been very difficult for me to meet people, and so she was kind enough to bring me up here. I—I didn't know she was receiving tonight."

Ellen's eyes softened. Her facile sympathy was touched by the haggard young face, the pitiful and manly attempt at explanation.

"I understand perfectly, and I'm sorry I blundered in upon you like the great cow in a China shop that I am. But now that I'm here, won't you let me say that I hope you'll soon be better, and giving us some more of your wonderful music. I've heard you so many times, and of course I couldn't help recognizing you the minute I saw your face."

Going to the door, she put her hand on the knob. "I guess I'll be going now. Stay as long as you like, Anne. I'll tell them you're dead, or have acquired a sick headache from the Bacardi."

Anne moved forward swiftly and joined her.

"Oh, no, don't make things out quite so black as that. I'll come with you. And we'll see if we can't get rid of them. It is almost two o'clock and they ought to be leaving any minute? Then, we can return and visit with Mr. Petrovsky again. How about it?"

"Great!" said Ellen. "I want to know just how you met 'an' everythin',' as Briggs says."

Anne looked back at Alexis pleadingly.

"Will you wait for us? I'm sure we shan't be long. Just make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you, I shall be all right."

He bowed stiffly as they left the room.

For a moment his hatred of the world almost included Anne. Did she think he was going to remain placidly by while she and this handsome, hulking, creature discussed his affairs? No, that was too much to ask him as yet. He must get out of here at once. When Anne did not find him she would understand. Yes, he must leave at once. But how? The front stairs were impossible, judging from the voices and laughter below. To sneak down the back way like a thief, even if he knew the way, would be utterly detestable. But what else could he do? Snatching up hat and coat, he once more muffled himself to unrecognition and was starting for the door when his eye fell upon the bell-rope. The idea of summoning Thompson to show him out the back way proved a comfortable compromise to his ruffled dignity. He pulled at the pretty tasseled vanity, and awaited the outcome with inward trepidation.

But it was Regina, not Thompson, who answered the summons.

At sight of the muffled figure the old woman nearly screamed. But before she could utter a sound Alexis seized her by the arm.

"Don't you know me, Regina?" he whispered.

"The *signorino* Alexis!" exclaimed the old woman softly. "Does the *signora* know?"

Alexis nodded. "I have just seen her, Regina, it's all right. She has gone downstairs again. And now I must go. Will you—will you please show me the back stairs and help me to get out without being seen? You,—you know—"

Distressed at his confusion, the old woman broke in eagerly.

"*Si, si, Signorino*, of course I understand. The *signorino* is not well, he does not wish to see a lot of strangers! If he will follow me?"

Running lightly down the corridor, she preceded him to a green baize door and held it open while he passed within. Ill at ease, raw from the recent encounter, he followed her down the back stairs and out to the side entrance.

"I hope the *signorino* is better?" queried Regina, as he passed by her into the areaway. "Shall he be making the music again soon?" she added eagerly.

As her meaning penetrated his misery, Alexis started, as if she had inadvertently touched some spiritual reflex. With a muttered excuse he strode out on to the sidewalk in front of the house.

The air had suddenly become raw and damp, and a blustering wind raged down the narrow street, tearing away in its passage the few last leaves from the small, sickly trees. Rain had commenced to fall in large, scattered drops.

Alexis shivered. He cast a reluctant look up at the luminous windows of the house. Voices and laughter floated out into the empty street. Shadows flitted and mingled, behind the opaque shades. He lingered uncertainly for a moment, the prey of undefinable desires.

Suddenly an excess of hilarity burst from the open door and the figure of a man and woman emerged on to the sidewalk. They passed Alexis and he instinctively crouched against the shadow of

the house.

"Anne is becoming secretive in her dangerous thirties," the woman was murmuring as they made their way towards a motor brougham that stood waiting by the curb. "You'll have to be careful, Marchese. You know they say she's had quite a vampish past."

The man laughed politely.

"I'm afraid I'm too old a friend to be frightened off as easily as that, Miss Barnes. As Mrs. Schuyler knows, I am one of those tiresome fellows who never listens to scandal. It has been a pleasant evening, hasn't it?"

The man deposited the discomfited lady within the brougham and watched the car drive off. Then, turning on his heel, he reëntered the house. Before the door closed behind him Alexis heard Anne's voice plaintively playful.

"Was she maligning me, Vittorio?"

But the man's answer, caressing, muffled, was lost within the house.

Shivering and dazed, Alexis pulled his collar up about his throat. Lowering his head against the rain, in a bull-like, butting gesture, he strode toward Fifth Avenue.

What a fool he had been to imagine he could interest a woman like Anne, an idolized doll, surrounded by male and female sycophants, who probably took advantage of her wealth and loneliness. A woman, whimsical as a pet kitten, who had enjoyed him like a new toy for a while, but as soon as he became hackneyed, would drop him as casually as she had taken him up. Really, it would be too callow of him to expect more! In her eyes he was only a thwarted musician who had enjoyed a flashing, comet-like success, only to be swallowed once more into the nethermost void. It was not that he grudged her elegant and expensive surroundings. He could not conceive of her in any other *milieu* (for instance, how uncomfortable she would be in the gorgeous, ready-made, apartment on 59th Street!) But it had all frightened him a little. He had missed the leveling *camaraderie* of the mountain lodge. The contrast had proved too glaring for his flimsy nerves, and he had swaggered before her like a bully. What must she think of him? What an ill-bred pup he must appear in contrast with this Marchese, this stalwart, suave man of the world who had known how to put a gossiping woman in her place without loss of temper or dignity, who had hinted of his friendship with Anne as of something too solid and enduring to be shaken by trivialities. Who was this man? What place did he occupy in Anne's life? Was he an unacknowledged lover, or a future husband? And what chance had he, Alexis Petrovskiy, the musical waif, against a man of her own caste, who not only could give her the position suited to her, but the honor which it is in the power of the poorest to bestow? While he himself had actually had the temerity to offer the ironic gift of a broken life and an illicit love. The wonder was not that she had laughed at his egotistical insanity, but that she had tempered her refusal with kindness.

Invaded by a desolate humility, he strode out from the ravine-like street on to the avenue. Disregarding a taxi which like a benevolent but unwieldy carrier-pigeon would have taken him safely home to Gramercy Square, he hurried across the wet and glistening pavement to where the park, naked, shorn, welcomed him drearily. Entering one of the windswept paths, he sank heavily on to a bench.

This was the end. He would not try to see Anne any more. He refused to draw her down into the slough of his misery again. He would finish up his affairs, settle a certain sum upon his mother and Claire, as much as he could afford, leaving only a meager allowance for his own future. Then he would go abroad and drag out the bathos of his days in some obscure corner of the old world, where his face and name had not penetrated. And perhaps the end would not be long in coming. For he had always felt that his would not be a long life. For the candle to blow out before it had spluttered to its ignominious finish, seemed suddenly both beautiful and fitting. The thought soothed his whirling senses like a promise of peace; a colossal lullaby from the infinite. Enfolded within its majestic irony, he drifted into a reverie in which all sense of time and space was lost. Chin sunk into the clammy collar of his overcoat, he gazed before him into the dripping branches of the trees. Gazed so long and remained so motionless that he did not notice when the rain ceased to fall. Nor observed that it had gradually solidified into a jelly-like fog which coiled about the trees in sickly wreaths.

He did not even look up when a hulking shadow moved between him and the enswathed world. It was not until a mechanical "move along, move along, man, the park ain't no dormitory," penetrated his dull senses, that he became aware of his chilled and paralyzed body. Looking stupidly up into the dim round face of the policeman, he broke into a short, hysterical laugh, rose unsteadily to his feet and laughing and coughing, wended his way down the wind-swept path in the wake of the scattering leaves.

CHAPTER X

MERRY-GO-ROUND

"Confess it, Anne. You are bored unspeakably, is it not so?" exclaimed the Marchese, as he poured a few drops of Bacardi into a cup of tea, before handing it to Anne. "As for me, who have only been in New York for two weeks, I am a ruin! Not a reposeful ruin like those I am digging up in Sicily, but rather like those of Pompeii, racked by earthquake and volcanic eruptions. How can you stand it?"

Anne smiled indulgently. The Marchese's symbolic hyperboles always amused her. Nestling into her cushions, she sipped her doctored tea.

"I am tired, Vittorio! But what else is there to do? One has got to go through the gestures, you know."

"Gestures? Contortions, you mean! The life you are leading is about as restful, not to say dignified, as that of a trapeze performer or an animal trainer. You will break down if you don't look out. And it doesn't suit you, *carissima*, this perpetual chasing. You were intended to be a *grande dame*, a—"

"A Florentine Marchesa?" broke in Anne maliciously. "I believe you would like to see me, old and settled with a flock of *bambini* clustered about my gouty knees, and a mustache bristling above my dewy lips!"

Not at all crestfallen, the Marchese gazed merrily into her stormy eyes.

"How we hate to be tied up!" he laughed. "And how we loathe the idea of being respectable and dowagerly. The *bambini*, of course, I couldn't answer for, but as to the mustache, there is always Zip!"

"Wretch!" she laughed.

The firelight played upon her pale features, as she returned his gaze. A tea-gown of claret-colored velvet clung to her relaxed body in suave folds, emphasizing the gardenia pallor of throat and arms, the russet splendor of her hair. He gave vent to his adoration.

"If you were not so slim, you'd make a gorgeous Titian as you lie there, Anne. There's something Sixteenth Century and magnificent about you. A Bianca Cappello smiling over the rim of a poisoned goblet. There's nothing modern about you, except your mode of life, which is as lurid and reposeful as a cubist daub. Let's see, what was to-day's hectic program?"

Anne laughed and reached for a crumplet. "Dressmaker's this morning and hats. Lunch with Gerald and a *matinée*. Inquisitorial tea at present. Later, dinner at the Ritz with you and Ellen and that new Hindoo of hers, the theater again and the new dance club. That's all. A nice little merry-go-round, warranted to keep on whirling forever, to the same tenpenny tune. With no disconcerting progress whatsoever. What more can you ask of life?" she added with a cynical little laugh.

His compassionate eyes embarrassed her, but she shrugged disdainfully.

"I admit I would have liked to do nothing to-night but sit before the fire and read one of my memoirs. But what can I do? The tickets were bought, the party arranged, so I suppose I must sip the bitter dregs of anti-climax philosophically."

"And so unfortunately must I," he sighed resignedly. "But the dance club, to watch you being ogled by an amorous Hindoo! I shudder. Anne, Anne, when will you put an end to my misery? Leave this, what do you call it, half-baked existence. Come with me to Florence, to Sicily. Let us lead a fuller life. A life of travel and repose, with a horizon wide enough for study and meditation, and an occasional oasis, if you desire, of theaters and dance clubs. Let our friends be those who dare to think and to do, who have learned to appreciate the exquisiteness of leisure, and not to fritter it away. You Americans treat an idle hour as if it were a horrible void that might engulf you if you didn't diligently fill it in with little nothings."

Much amused, Anne lit a cigarette.

"A proposal and a sermon in one breath! Really, Vittorio, you are certainly an original. You come all the way from Italy to drag me back to your prehistoric caves and then preach to me in a thoroughly mediæval and unprehistoric manner. You spoil your own effects. I had almost made up my mind to return to Florence before Christmas—but now!"

She rolled her eyes and gestured comically.

"Don't be capricious, Anne darling. You know I'm no preacher. And you would look adorable attired in white linen knickerbockers, riding on the back of a donkey—"

"Supporting a heavy white umbrella with one hand, and brushing off a horde of cannibalistic flies with the other—so restful and inspiring!" Anne blew smoke rings into his eager, dark face.

"There are no flies in winter, and where I've been working it is sometimes very cold. The white umbrella would be entirely unnecessary. My villa is an antique dream of old-rose marble and its terrace and garden seem to sweep right out into the ardent blue of the sea."

"What about modern improvements?" inquired Anne flippantly. But at his description her pupils had expanded, her whole face had taken on a softer, more rested, expression.

"There is a bath," he replied simply. "But of course no electricity. Hanging lamps and an army of candles shed a soft benediction over the old walls. I promise you, you will be very comfortable. It is a foolish gardener who transplants an exotic into the soil of unprotected fields."

He leaned forward earnestly. Her eyes cloudy with feeling, she laid her hand upon his.

"You are so adorably literal, Vittorio. Such a boy in spite of all your experience! Any woman who couldn't trust herself to go with you to the ends of the earth, would be a blind fool."

"Then you will make up your mind? You will come?" he cried eagerly.

She shook her head with a maternal smile.

"Who knows, Vittorio? My emotions seem to be as unstable as the weather. I'm about as reliable as a will-o'-the-wisp. Better place your allegiance elsewhere, dear friend. I have kept you waiting too long already."

He rose to his feet and stood over her vehemently.

"Never, never. There's no woman who can compare with you, *bellissima donna*. And if there is, I do not want her!"

Anne's eyes twinkled.

"How about the statuesque Ellen? One doesn't shed turquoise necklaces for nothing."

He blushed like a guilty school boy.

"Were you jealous, Anne?" His eyes were uncontrollably eager.

"Perhaps a little. If it would please you, Vittorio?" she teased.

He threw back his head, laughing ruefully.

"It is impossible to get the better of you. I retire defeated, as usual." He pointed with an expressive forefinger at the clock. "I imagine Regina is fuming outside in the corridor, waiting to slip some new magnificence upon you, to dazzle us all with to-night. But she cannot improve upon perfection."

Indicating the claret velvet with a quick gesture, he bent over her hand and kissed it lightly.

As the door closed behind him, Anne's smile faded. She dropped back onto the chaise-longue and closed her eyes.

The last ten days had been horrible. A kaleidoscopic nightmare with about as much plot and sequence as a Broadway revue. The only consoling factor being the large and sane devotion of Vittorio. Gerald had made an amorous bore of himself, and she had had to snub him. And Ellen, well it had been too detestable of her to recognize Alexis at sight like that. And her way of accepting Anne's explanation, more than irritating. Indulging in one or two lovers a year, she was delighted to catch Anne in what she transparently considered a similar frailty. It had been still more humiliating to have to demand secrecy. But in order to protect Alexis, it had been the only thing to do. And although Ellen's good nature was proverbial, so was her indiscretion. To expect her to keep eternal silence upon her discovery of the return of Alexis Petrovsky, over whom the entire musical world was agog, would be demanding a stoical repression of which the woman was incapable. It was only a question of time before Alexis' secret would be common property. Meanwhile the only thing to do was to keep Ellen in a good humor and watch her like a hawk, which was more difficult than usual, as she was resting between plays and insisted upon attending every show and dance club in New York, until Anne's nerves were frayed and existence had become a monotonous nightmare of jazz and naked shoulders.

And the worst of it was that Anne had neither seen nor heard from Alexis since he had disappeared from the house on that ghastly night of his coming. She had returned to her sitting room after the others had all gone, to find it empty except for Regina, whose explanation of his hurried flight had not proved very comforting. Evidently, he had been wounded to the quick, not only by her coldness, but by the entire ignominious situation. Her offer of a tepid friendship had driven him away perhaps forever. Otherwise how could his continued silence be accounted for? He had mistaken hesitation for anger, ridicule as dismissal. Although he must have been exposed for years, ever since adolescence, to that greedy feminine horde who prey upon the *matinée* idol, he had remained almost virginal. Even marriage had not destroyed a certain quality of innocence, at once boyish and pathetic. A quality which appealed to Anne's disillusionment more strongly than any amount of *savoir faire*. And she knew instinctively that his love for her, although young as yet, was genuine. Yes, he loved her, and yet, he had found the courage not to break silence for ten days. And she, herself, had permitted matters to drag along, expecting a message from him any moment.

But if the silence continued much longer, she would have to do something. Gramercy Park is limited after all, and she would find him if she had to canvass every house on the Square.

Meanwhile, what had happened to him? Had her defection driven him back to the old misery and despair? Was he lonely and hag-ridden, in a music-less hell that might peradventure drive him to suicide? Or had he perhaps come to his senses and returned to his wife in sheer cynical weariness? Of course, that would be the best thing that could happen to him and she, Anne, sincerely tried to hope that it had.

Probably at this moment, while she was worrying herself almost sick over him, he was partaking of the fattened calf at the family board.

The thought set her suddenly upon her feet. She stood and looked down into the flames moodily. Why had she permitted herself to get into such a state of nerves? Why worry about a neurotic, love-sick boy whom, a few weeks ago, she had never even met? Why not take the whole thing as an incident, interesting no doubt while it lasted, but now closed? She shrugged. She knew all the time that she was desperately unhappy, and would remain so until she was sure of Alexis' whereabouts.

Meanwhile, life must go on, and if she did not dress immediately she would hold up the whole party. While she had been mooning over Alexis like a love-sick school-girl, the time had flown by relentlessly, and soon poor Vittorio would be back to take up the weary grind once more.

A smile of self-ridicule upon her lips, she went into the adjoining bedroom and submitted herself to the impatient ministrations of Regina.

"I know I am late," she admitted impenitently. "But I had my bath before tea and there isn't really much to do." She slipped out of the tea-gown and handed it to the woman. "I know just how cross you are. Just how much you hate New York, and all the rest of it. So do cheer up, there's a dear!"

Sitting on the edge of the white bed, she held out a long, slim leg which Regina vested with stocking and slipper the ripe hue of old gold.

"The *signora* will be sick if she goes on like this!" muttered the old woman. "And the poor *Signor Marchese* looks like death!"

Anne rose and looked at herself in the cheval-glass with a laugh. Slim and boyish in her silken slippers, gold stockings glimmering on rounded calves, she was particularly alluring. How absurd to indulge in melodramatics when one was looking exactly like a glove-silk undervest advertisement in *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*!

"Poor Regina, how she loves her Marchese," she teased. She threw a *négligée* over polished shoulders and sat down before the gay little toilet table.

"Do my hair as quickly as you can," she added. "The poor man will be back for me within the half

hour.”

Regina sighed pleasantly.

“He’s a *gallantuomo*,” she murmured. Pulling out the large shell pins, she allowed Anne’s hair to fall over her shoulders in a copper cascade.

“Is the *signora* thinking of returning to Florence before Christmas this year?” she hinted, brush in hand.

Anne laughed again.

“What a shameless propagandist you are, Regina! Would it please you if I did?” she added, avoiding the eyes in the mirror almost shyly.

Her cherished hopes for the Marchese flaming upwards, the Italian manipulated the golden coils deftly. “The *signora* knows only too well!” she replied with naïve dignity. She placed a jeweled bandeau about Anne’s head. “The hair is a marvel to-night, and in the gown of gold brocade the *Signora* will be magnificent. She should be going to Court and not wasting herself upon Broadway.”

Her characteristic snort of contempt delighted Anne. She led her on to more flagrant abuse, wriggling into the golden gown in high amusement. Then very regal in a Kolinsky evening coat, she swept down upon the waiting Marchese.

“Regina has been so funny,” she said.

He took her hand and looked down into her mocking face with renewed enchantment.

“The poor thing will never rest until she sees your coronet pressing down my auburn locks.”

His laugh was tender.

“I shall have to pension her handsomely, shall I not?” he said lightly, as the butler opened the door for them to pass out.

The night was clear but unexpectedly cold. Over the tops of the high, narrow houses a hard heaven was studded with metallic stars. Anne shivered and drew closer to the Marchese.

“This hateful cold, it chills me to the marrow,” she murmured, between chattering teeth, as they went towards the car.

He stopped in his tracks, and bent over her.

“Let us leave it all behind us, Anne. Come with me to Italy!”

The entreaty was almost a command. Anne looked up into his face with growing decision. After all,—why not? She had kept him waiting long enough. She was about to speak, to put an end to his doubts, when a yellow taxi grazed the corner and stopped noisily back of Anne’s motor.

A slight figure jumped out and hurried across the sidewalk towards them.

“Is this Mrs. Schuyler?” inquired an eager young voice. Anne turned about in surprise. Where had she heard that intense voice, those words before? Apprehension descended upon her. She drew still closer to Vittorio.

“Yes, this is Mrs. Schuyler,” she answered mechanically. “What is it, what is the matter?”

An insistent hand was laid upon Anne’s sleeve.

“This is Claire Petrovsky. I have come to tell you that Alexis is very ill, and to ask if you will come to him at once. He wants you.” The voice faltered. Then as Anne continued to look down at her in a daze, continued harshly, “Oh, don’t you understand? Alexis is ill and he needs you!”

She shook Anne by the arm.

A sudden light came into Anne’s clouded eyes. A spasm of fear gripped her. She threw an arm about the girl’s shoulders and hurried her towards the motor.

“Of course I will come,” she cried unevenly. “Here, get into the car. Where to?”

She pushed the girl into the limousine and paused a moment beside Vittorio to collect herself.

“I’m so sorry, Vittorio,” she said hurriedly. “But you see I cannot possibly go with you to-night. A—a friend of mine is very ill and I must go to him at once. I’m sure you understand. I hate to drop you this way, but you’ll take the taxi? Won’t you? And go without me?”

A quiver passed over the *Marchese’s* face. He bowed rather stiffly.

“Of course, Anne. You must do what is right. But it will be a great disappointment to us all.” He hesitated. “Shall I see you again soon?”

Compunction seized her.

“Come to tea with me to-morrow,” she said with renewed composure. “I wish I could explain all this to you now, but I simply haven’t the time.”

She touched him lightly on the arm and then stepped into the car. A moment later she and Claire Petrovsky were whisked around the corner and into Park Avenue.

The Italian stared after them with a strange expression. He settled with the taxi-driver, then turned to reënter the house. He would telephone immediately to Ellen and tell her to procure another couple for the night’s festivities. A walk down the length of Fifth Avenue, a solitary *tâble d’hôte* at some obscure Italian restaurant were more to his mood.

CHAPTER XI

ANNE'S VIGIL

As the car swerved from the curb, Anne sank against the cushions. Turning to the immobile figure at her side, she questioned anxiously.

"Is Alexis—is Mr. Petrovsky very ill?"

The shadowy form retained its frozen quiescence.

"He is perhaps dying," said the light, harsh voice.

"Oh!" Anne's cry was involuntary. Conscious of the flood of hatred beating against her, she steeled herself. When she spoke her voice was well under control.

"Surely you can't mean that! Why, what is the matter?"

The delicate profile beside her, momentarily illuminated by a street lamp, acquired the translucent hardness of carved, white jade. "He has pneumonia." Once more in shadow, the mask turned towards Anne. A pair of eyes gleamed from out of dark caverns. "It developed several days ago. He had had a bad cough for about two weeks, and of course had taken no care of it." The dull voice ceased.

Beneath her fur cape, Anne clasped gloved hands convulsively together.

"Oh, poor boy, and he never let me know!" she murmured contritely. She faced with shame a thrill of relief. So Alexis had not neglected her wilfully after all.

"Where is he now? Is he—alone?"

The answer came deliberately, from averted lips.

"Yes, he is in his apartment in Gramercy Park. He is alone with the exception of a day and night nurse. He—he prefers it that way." She faltered for the first time, then continued with a resumption of hardness. "Women have always been superfluous to Alexis. I have heard all geniuses are the same."

The sheer, foolish bravado of it pierced Anne's heart. The impulse to put her arms about the proud, suffering, little creature was almost irresistible, but she repelled it scornfully. Why cheapen the child's dignity by histrionics? This was obviously neither the time nor place for explanations. Let those come later. The important thing at present was to get to Alexis as quickly as possible, and with as little friction. So she said nothing, but gazed steadily at the stream of motors which glutted Park Avenue like an endless chain of monster glowworms.

Without turning perceptibly, Claire cast a surreptitious glance in her direction. In the constant glare from passing motors, Anne emerged, doubly magnificent in regal furs, and jeweled band glowing within the copper meshes of her hair, the proud face of a patrician, charmingly insolent, utterly non-committal. Beside her, Claire felt smitten with mediocrity as with a hopeless disease. And yet it was she herself who was bringing this woman to Alexis. Why not? He desired her. Perhaps his very life depended upon her presence. When existence narrowed down to a primal factor such as death, one shed all fears except one. Her eyes fixed upon Anne, she suddenly laughed aloud.

"I startled you, didn't I?" she said harshly, in response to Anne's look of surprise, "but the mirthfulness of the occasion suddenly overcame me. It—it is funny, isn't it? Just——" her voice faltered ever so slightly, "just like the movies?"

Anne looked back at her gently. "I doubt if real life could ever be as complicated as Hollywood imagines, don't you?" she replied impersonally.

Bitterly ashamed of her outburst, Claire was about to reply with the same aloofness, when the motor turned into 21st Street and glided toward Gramercy Square. It stopped before a tall, narrow house with an English basement.

"Are we there?" asked Anne.

Her face fiery with chagrin, Claire nodded laconically.

They mounted in the elevator and were admitted into the studio by Mme. Petrovsky.

"This is very good of you to take pity upon my poor boy," said a suave voice.

Anne felt herself drawn swiftly into the room. An inscrutable China-doll face gazed blankly into her own.

"Not at all," she replied quietly. "I am distressed to hear of your son's illness and only hope I shall be of some use."

The small, blue eyes urbanely veiled, were fixed upon Anne's face.

"I'm afraid you're too modest," continued the bland voice. Dislike, tinged with a hint of curiosity lurked beneath the perfect manner. "The doctor seems to think you are necessary for my son's recovery, and we, his wife and mother," the eyes ceased to bore through Anne momentarily and swept ironically over Claire's shrinking figure, "are only too grateful." She came a little nearer and laid a massive hand on Anne's cloak. "Perhaps you'd better keep your wrap on. The sick-room is very cold, and you're not exactly dressed for the occasion, are you, dear lady?"

"Perhaps not," replied Anne, a frozen anger accumulating in her voice. "You see I was on my way to the theater. But isn't this delay unnecessary, Mme. Petrovsky? Won't you please take me in to your son? That is, if the doctor permits?"

Perfect urbanity descended once more upon Mme. Petrovsky.

"Certainly," she said in brisk, business-like tones. "Just wait a minute and I'll call the nurse."

She crossed the large studio with ponderous agility and tapped upon a glass paneled door. It opened just enough to permit the emerging of a white-capped head. Whispered words were exchanged, and Anne was beckoned forward.

With a glance of commiseration for Claire, who had sunk into a chair next the wall and was leaning forward like a broken thing, Anne passed by her swiftly.

The next moment she knelt at Alexis's bedside.

Emaciated, a spot of crimson beneath each glowing eye, his labored breathing filled the room with tragic effort. Suppressing a cry of pity, Anne took one of the burning hands and held it between her

cool palms, as if to quench the inward fire. But the glittering eyes, as they fell upon her, held no gleam of recognition. The monotonous agony of ingoing and outgoing breath continued as before.

"Will he die?" she whispered to the nurse who had closed the door upon Mme. Petrovsky, and tiptoed back again to the bedside.

The woman looked non-committal. In the shaded glare from the night light, green rings about her eyes cut into her face like spherical eclipses.

"If the fever goes down he ought to live," she said. "The congestion in the lung is bad, but so far has not spread to the other. If the cause of cerebral excitement can be removed"—her eyes rested upon Anne curiously—"he will probably get well."

"He doesn't seem to be particularly excited? I understood that——" Anne broke off in some confusion, and then continued sturdily, "that he had been asking for me?"

The nurse nodded.

"Oh, he has asked for you! That is, he has asked for some lady named 'Anne' almost constantly, and I suppose that means you? You see he has his quiet moments, and this is one of them. A sort of unconsciousness, you know. I guess it's Nature's way of giving him a rest."

"How long do these periods usually last?"

"Anywhere from ten minutes to an hour. You'd better stay all night. I'll make up the daybed for you in the studio. The doctor will be here soon again and will probably want to talk things over with you. If you can only be here when one of his spells comes on, it may make all the difference!"

"Very well." Anne put Alexis' hand back on to the cover and rose to her feet. "I will stay, of course. If you'll show me where the telephone is, I'll call up my maid and have her send me a few necessary things for the night. By the way," she hesitated a moment as she reached the door, "are the other two ladies spending the night here also?"

The nurse looked surprised.

"Oh no, ma'am. They always go home at night. They've probably left already. The telephone's right in the studio by the front door. Yes, that's it."

So they had gone! With a sensation of reprieve, Anne crossed the empty room quickly and got into communication with Regina.

Half an hour later she was installed in the raised alcove off the studio.

But it would be days before Anne would see her own house again. Days in which she and the doctor and the nurse would wrestle with fiery death for the life of Alexis Petrovsky.

THE HEALING VISION

The heavy glass door rang beneath the tap of impatient knuckles. Aroused abruptly from fitful unconsciousness into which she had drifted unawares, Anne sat up in bed and pressed both hands to her pounding heart.

"Yes, yes, what is it?" she cried in muffled terror. Was Alexis perhaps dying?

"Don't be scared. It's only me, Miss Wilson," replied the nurse's rather uncouth voice. "Mr. Petrovsky is conscious and I thought you'd better come."

Anne sprang out of bed and donned slippers and dressing gown.

"Is he asking for me?" Her voice was unsteady, as she opened the door and went out into the studio.

"No ma'am, he seems quite rational for the moment. Asked for a drink of water. But I thought——"

"Yes, yes," whispered Anne. She brushed by the woman impatiently.

"You were quite right to call me." She stumbled across the shadowy studio and entered the dimly-lit bedroom beyond.

Hair ruffled above the unshaven young face, Alexis' eyes stared into vacancy.

Gliding forward, Anne slipped on to her knees by the bed.

"Alexis," she murmured beneath her breath. "Alexis," she repeated barely louder than the pounding of her own heart.

The sunken eyes turned slowly and met hers in a blur of bewilderment.

"Anne?" he whispered, above his rough breathing. "Anne?"

Blinded by a mist of tears, she nodded at him reassuringly.

"Yes, dear, it is I. It is Anne."

The sound of her voice seemed to puzzle him. He frowned helplessly. The uneven breathing broke suddenly, then became more clamorous than before.

"Strange, you have never spoken before? And your hair—your hair?" He leaned towards her abruptly, and placed his hand upon the hair which streamed about her shoulders in a golden rain.

"Your hair—I have never dreamed of it like this before to-night!" His fingers plunged into the gleaming tendrils. "It actually feels alive." He shuddered violently and closed his eyes.

Anne feared he was losing consciousness again. Loosening the clutching fingers from her hair, she placed his hand upon her face.

"This is not a dream, Alexis," she murmured, lips against his parched palm. "Am I not real? Can you not feel as well as hear me speak to you?"

At the moist pressure of Anne's lips, a second shudder coursed through Alexis.

"No, no," he pleaded hoarsely. "I must not awaken. I shall not awaken. I want to go on dreaming—dreaming forever." His voice trailed into a husky murmur. Then ceased. His head fell back heavily upon the pillow.

Terror tugged at Anne's heartstrings. She called into the other room for Miss Wilson.

"Oh come, quickly, I'm afraid he has fainted."

Her sobbing cry brought the nurse in immediately. She bent over the bed, then turned a reassuring smile upon Anne.

"He is asleep," she whispered, finger upon lips. "The best sleep he has had, poor young man, since I've been here. See, his forehead is moist. He will get well now. Aren't you glad you stayed?" She looked at Anne meaningly.

Anne smiled back at her with quivering lips.

"But had we not better call up the doctor, just to be on the safe side?" she whispered, hesitant in spite of the woman's evident confidence.

The nurse looked at her with condescension. She pursed her lips.

"Not at all, ma'am. Don't worry. All Mr. Petrovsky needs now is sleep. No doctor could do as much for him. And it looks as if he'd sleep for hours now. Poor boy, he surely needs it." Then noting Anne's pallor and look of fatigue, "You look as if you needed it, too. Come right back to bed now and I'll tuck you up. Shall I make you a cup of tea?"

Anne shook her head, smiling faintly.

"Oh no, thank you, Miss Wilson. You have enough to do without taking care of me. But don't you think I ought to stay up in case he should awaken again?"

She shivered slightly as she spoke. And the nurse led her out of the room and closed the door gently.

"You're catching cold in this icebox," she said peremptorily. "We have to keep the sick room quite cold, you know. But I'm dressed suitably and you're not." She touched the silken *négligée* with a mixture of scorn and longing. "Better get yourself a flannel wrapper like mine." She smiled grimly. "Not beautiful, but useful, you know."

With an undefined feeling of shame, Anne trotted obediently back to bed, accepting thankfully a cup of tea and the hot water bag insisted upon by Miss Wilson.

"You can't afford to take any risk, and pneumonia is contagious, you know." She tucked the blankets about Anne almost caressingly.

"You make me feel so useless and foolish going back to bed, when you're preparing to stay up all night!" protested Anne.

Miss Wilson's smile seemed oddly motherly upon her spinster-like face.

"That's my business. We all have our duties, you know. And I guess you have more than done yours to-night."

One more pat to the bedclothes, and she was gone. As the door closed behind her, Anne's eyelids drooped. In a moment she was drifting on the same uncharted sea as Alexis Petrovsky.

In the morning Alexis was rational for the first time in days and his fever had gone down several

degrees. Anne heard the joyful news from Miss Wilson just as the day-nurse was preparing to take the other's place.

"All the same, you had better not go in to see him until after you have asked the doctor's advice. Last night was the psychological moment, and it would be a shame for you to undo all your good work," whispered Miss Wilson, her hand on the front door. "You haven't long to wait, the doctor will be here any minute now. Bye-by until to-night."

Anne stationed herself at the window, and looked down into Gramercy Park. A mantle of snow overlay everything. And in the carefully dug-out paths children were playing. They had erected a snow fort, over which the statue of Edwin Booth brooded like an austere and arctic angel. A hail of snowballs from which arose shrill cries and laughter showered about the statue furiously. Anne smiled. What a picture the children made, with their rosy faces and brilliant-colored sweaters, against the blue-shadowed snow! She saw a nurse-girl approach and open the iron gate with a large key. How small the paradise! How carefully guarded! How long before these very children would be thrust forth from the gates into the sordid business of living?

As if to reassure her, the big clock in the Madison Square tower boomed goldenly. Nine o'clock, and the doctor had not arrived yet. Anne sighed impatiently. She was not looking forward to her interview with the doctor. The situation was awkward. The more she thought about it, the more ill at ease she became. The febrile excitement of the past night, under control, she faced the situation dispassionately. Where was she drifting, and into what? In coming to Alexis' rescue, was she perhaps jeopardizing against the rocks her own hitherto well-steered little bark? Perhaps! She shrugged fatalistically, and going to the table, was about to take up a book when the door-bell rang. It was the doctor. The day-nurse, a plump and pleasant little person, let him in. Casting one penetrating glance at Anne, he passed through the studio hurriedly and entered the bedroom.

With a feeling of relief, Anne reopened her book and tried not to listen. But Alexis' voice, though hoarse and weak, reached her plainly. It somehow conveyed a message of peace, as if its owner had attained some un hoped-for refuge.

He is really better. He is going to live, she thought, exultantly. Oh, I only hope it keeps up. She clasped her hands in her lap feverishly, letting the three voices in the next room sweep over her.

The dreaded interview proved absurdly simple after all. Brusquely uninterested in Anne, except for the effect he hoped she would have on his patient, the little doctor barked his orders without ceremony.

The patient was decidedly better, but not yet out of danger. All unhappy excitement must be avoided. His mother and wife were not to see him until further orders, and, Anne herself, only for five minutes at a time. And at that as seldom as possible. However, she was to remain within call, as her presence was obviously of benefit to the case.

Anne listened in acquiescent silence, her manner dry as the doctor's own. When the door closed upon his plump assurance, she smiled rather wryly. So she was to remain virtually a prisoner for days! What would people think? What could she say to put them off the track? She would have to invent some tale of having been called out of town, down to Virginia perhaps, to see her ailing, old aunt? She did not like it at all, this having to lie! With a helpless little shake of the head she walked over to the oval mirror and gazed rather cynically at her own reflection.

She was glad Regina had sent the green jersey dress. It was becoming and informal, and brought out the russet tints in her hair. What a pity she was so pale this morning! It would have pleased her to look her most beautiful for Alexis' sake, but perhaps he wouldn't even notice? She patted her hair into order, a new and searching humility in her eyes. The door opened and the nurse stood upon the threshold.

"Mr. Petrovsky is ready to see you," she said, her admiring gaze upon Anne's hair. "You don't mind if I time you? The doctor's orders were for five minutes only."

Anne turned and faced the girl, outwardly serene, but her heart was knocking against her side.

"Of course not. Please consider me absolutely under your orders, nurse. Shall I go in?" With a regal inclination of the head and shaky knees she swept by into the sick-room.

Alexis greeted her from amidst freshened pillows.

"I had a dream last night," he whispered huskily. His eyes leapt to hers like wind-blown flames. "They tell me it was true?"

She approached the bed and stood looking down upon him.

"If your dream was of me, I was here," she said simply, almost shyly. They continued to look at each other in silence. He put forth a thin hand and fingered her dress.

"Anne—Anne?" he queried weakly. "Can I believe my eyes?"

"Is it so difficult?" she replied. "My dear, they told me you were ill, and so I came."

Sinking down into the chair next the bed, she took his groping fingers and stroked them gently. "Poor dear, poor dear."

The fingers crept about her slender wrist and clung feebly. "I thought I'd lost you forever," he muttered.

The gentle stroke continued.

"That was foolish, Alexis." Her voice was barely audible.

"You sent me from you in anger," he insisted mournfully.

Anne shook her head, smiling at him with reproach.

"Oh no, you were mistaken. I never sent you away. It was you who never came to see me again, or called me up! What was I to think or do? In a case like that a woman cannot, does not, want to take the initiative. Besides, I didn't even have your address."

The searching eyes had not left her face for a moment, and as she concluded, they kindled hungrily.

"Did you really want me to come back?" The question was an entreaty.

"Of course, foolish one. I was awfully worried about you." She laughed softly. "But now I must go. Your nurse will be dragging me out in another minute. And we must obey orders."

"Oh, don't go, don't go!" He flushed deeply. "Promise me you will stay?" Sitting up in bed, he

clasped both arms about her shoulders and buried his burning face in her neck.

Anne disentangled herself.

"I shall be in the next room, within call," she said rather breathlessly. "You must be good and do as the doctor says, or you won't get well."

He fell back upon the pillow and looked up at her.

"Is it as bad as that?" he whispered with a wry smile. "Six weeks ago I would have welcomed the tidings, but now, that you are here, that you have forgiven me, I am afraid. Promise, promise you will not leave me?"

A lump in Anne's throat, she nodded. "I will not leave the apartment until you are entirely out of danger, Alexis," she whispered, her hand on his tumbled hair.

He heaved a sigh of satisfaction, and drawing her fingers to his fever-smitten lips, kissed them pleadingly.

"Now you may go. If it is only into the other room? But first prove that you were really here last night."

She knitted her brows.

"But how can I, Alexis, if you won't take my word?"

"Take down your hair," was his whispered command. "Let me see if it looks the same as in my dream."

She blushed.

"No, no, I cannot. What would the nurse think?" She hesitated a moment with puzzled brows. "But yes, I'll tell you what I will do." Her eyes laughed down at him reassuringly.

"What?" he whispered joyously.

"I can show you the dressing-gown I had on. Do you remember what it looked like?"

"Golden as honey," he murmured, his eyes upon her hair. "Yes, 'seeing is believing.'"

She laughed, and running out of the room, returned with the *négligée* on her arm. At the sight his smouldering eyes flared anew.

"Yes, that is it," he whispered. "Will you put it on for me to-night, dear Anne?"

The flush still upon her cheeks, Anne nodded weakly. After all, had not the doctor said he must be humored?

"And now good-bye for the present, Alexis. See, here's your nurse waiting to drag me out by the hair." She tried to laugh.

The nurse appeared on the threshold, coughing apologetically. "I do hope you'll excuse me for disturbing you, but you see it has really been seven minutes, instead of five." The ghost of a twinkle in her eye, she approached them gingerly.

"All right, Anne, go if you must," Alexis sighed mournfully. "But please, please, won't you kiss me first, just to prove you're really here?"

Anne stooped over him, laughing unsteadily. "I, don't usually have to answer to roll-call like this." She pressed her lips lightly upon the hot forehead, beneath the towseled, fair hair. "There, will you be good now!"

The touch of her lips flamed through Alexis's body. He closed his eyes in sheer ecstasy. When he opened them Anne had disappeared.

The remainder of the day passed in rapid monotony, fevered, unreal as a dream, which though sweet, borders upon the edge of nightmare. After having watched Alexis sip at a little warm milk, (he was not permitted to talk this time, only to look into her face and hold her hand), she went to a nearby tea-room for lunch. Then strolled briskly about the enclosed park, before returning to the studio, quite like a professional nurse, as she told herself.

Alexis was asleep when she came in. She threw herself upon the couch with a book and a cigarette. Gradually, the white-gold noon of December faded into violet. Dusk crept through the curtained windows, stole up the walls, swathing the room in heavy, somber folds until it became a dim cavern.

The book slipped from Anne's fingers. She dozed.

It was not until after six o'clock that she remembered having invited the Marchese to tea that very afternoon.

Conscience-smitten, she rose, and stumbling across the shadowy studio, took up the telephone and called up her house. Regina answered volubly, Yes, the *Signor Marchese* had been there and left. She had told him the *Signora* had been called away to see a sick friend and had not returned as yet. Had she, Regina, done right? Yes, Anne supposed she had (with a little private grimace). Had the Marchese seemed hurt? Regina's respectful voice became lugubrious. Yes, he had! He had gone away with an air of great sorrow!

Anne sighed. "Please call him up and say that I am writing, Regina, that's a dear!"

"*Benissimo*, all shall be as the *Signora* declares," came in relieved tones over the wire.

Anne hung up the receiver with a fatalistic shrug. Poor Vittorio, he was faring rather badly. Was he not? She would have to make it up to him in the future!

CHAPTER XIII

BALM

Clear and still as one of those miniature landscapes enclosed in a crystal ball, Central Park shimmered all snow and sunshine. Goaded by torturing thoughts, Claire trudged stoically forward. Behind her, mincing carefully upon the crisp carpet of snow followed Béb , shivering but dutiful. It was Sunday and the path was crowded by eager people; skates clanging metallically from their arms, faces rosy from the cold. Unmindful of the titters called forth by B b 's diminutive size and enormous dignity, Claire passed through the throng unawares. It seemed scarcely possible that it was only last night she had taken Mrs. Schuyler to Alexis. So endless had seemed the intervening hours, so weighted with tragedy. Then this morning had come the ultimatum from the doctor, communicated briskly over the telephone by the cool voice of the nurse. Mr. Petrovsky was decidedly better, but she and his mother were requested not to attempt to see him for several days, as all undue excitement would be extremely bad, not to say dangerous to the patient in his present condition. That was all. Not a word had been said about Mrs. Schuyler or whether Alexis was yet aware of her presence. And Claire had not cared to ask. Bitter intuition flooded her, creating a succession of images, distorted, exaggerated, but fundamentally true. Anne sitting by Alexis, smoothing his pillow; holding his hand, flooding his being with the subtle magnetism of her beauty. Images constantly unwinding themselves, like the reels in a cinematic film. Until Claire's nerves were raw and writhing. Half-maddened, she had thrown on hat and coat, and with B b  in her stormy wake, had gone to the park. It was the stereotyped, daily walk, and yet as usual the crisp air, the glittering sunshine undefinably assuaged her shrieking nerves.

"Hey, lady, stop a minute!"

Heedless of the peremptory voice at her elbow, Claire walked on.

"Say, stop there, you lady with the pup!"

The finger of authority upon her arm, Claire turned about in astonishment.

"Were you speaking to me?" she inquired in amazement of the burly policeman at her side.

"I wuz!" The tone was highly ironic. "How about the muzzle?"

"Oh," Claire suddenly understood. "Why, I thought he was too small to need a muzzle. Besides, he has hardly any teeth left anyhow!"

The policeman smiled sarcastically.

"That's the same old gag! They never has any teeth. Not till they bite some uppish old geezer, and a feller like me loses his job for lettin' 'em loose on the street! Name? Address?" He took out a small book and looked at Claire ferociously.

Her indifference scarcely rippled, Claire was about to comply, when a man crossed the street and interposed himself between them.

"What's the matter, Bill? Afraid the flea'll bite you?" exclaimed a jocular voice. "Here, take this, that's good medicine for flea bites. I ought to know, I'm a doctor. Am I not, Mrs. Petrovsky?"

The man wheeled and Claire found herself looking up into the amused face of Dr. Elliott.

"Why, it's you!" Her eyes were wide with surprise.

"You thought I was trying to pick you up, didn't you?" laughed the young doctor. "Well, I am! My car is across the street. Come on, it's a perfect day for a drive!" He nodded gayly to the policeman, who was pocketing his medicine in mollified silence. A hand beneath Claire's arm, he started to pilot her through the traffic.

She hesitated on the curb, looking up at him in plaintive terror. His professional eye noted her pallor and the wistful rings about the dark eyes.

"But I don't think I'd better," stammered Claire. "I—I came out for a walk, you know. You—you wanted me to walk!"

"What a timid little lady! I shan't run away with you. Won't you change your mind, please? It's such a wonderful day and I'm all alone in the big city. I promise not to be ogreish!"

The dawn of a smile broke the tightened line of her lips.

"Well, if you're lonely?" she conceded. "It would be selfish of me not to, wouldn't it?"

He looked down upon her in surprise. Why, the girl looked almost pretty. If she wouldn't wear such awful hats, and had a little color in her cheeks, she wouldn't be bad at all. At any rate, she was the most pathetic little creature he had seen in a dog's age. And a fellow's heart warmed to her most unprofessionally.

"Good for you!" He picked up B b  with one hand, and piloting Claire with the other, threaded the way carefully through the holiday traffic.

"I wish we had a sleigh and a pair of horses." He helped her into the Buick coup  and got in beside her. The machine started. "It's a perfect day for the country. What do you say to driving out into Westchester?"

Claire flushed joyfully.

"Oh, I'd love it," she cried, off her guard. "I'm so tired of Riverside Drive and the Park. It's my daily penance, you know." Her smile faded.

He nodded sympathetically. "Yes, I know."

They joined the northward traffic. With joyful tail-wagging B b  leaped to the window and stared out ecstatically.

"He loves it," said Claire, and smiled her tired little smile. "He goes out in the car with me every day, and never seems to get tired of it as I do."

"Do you always go alone?" asked the doctor shortly.

She turned her face away from the searching gray eyes.

"Yes, but I don't mind. It—it's a good time to think, you know."

"Yes," his searching eyes explored the averted cheek, upon which her lashes fluttered nervously.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question, Mrs. Petrovsky?"

She turned apprehensive eyes upon him.

"Oh, no, Dr. Elliott, of course not."

"Isn't your husband the famous Mr. Petrovsky, the well-known pianist or something?"

"The violinist," she corrected quietly. "Yes, Dr. Elliott."

"So I thought. Didn't he have a breakdown of some sort last summer? I don't keep up much with artists and people like that, I haven't time, but I seem to remember having read something about it in the papers."

Claire's voice faltered. She answered somewhat shortly. "Yes, he was very ill, almost all summer. And now he has pneumonia."

Dr. Elliott looked startled.

"Pneumonia? But that is a shame, Mrs. Petrovsky. Is he in the hospital?"

She hesitated visibly.

"No, he is in his studio at Gramercy Park."

He mastered a twinge of compunction, and persisted. It was absolutely necessary that the girl should relieve her over-charged heart. That she was apparently in bitter trouble of some sort had been palpable to him ever since he first visited her in the hospital. Now that she was home again and he had met that amiably sinister aunt, he felt more strongly than ever her crying need of help.

"Taken ill while practicing, I suppose?" he continued casually.

With a useless effort to control her convulsed face, Claire met his eyes reproachfully. Why could he not accept her subterfuge?

"Mr. Petrovsky and I are not living together," she said quickly, mustering a few pitiful shreds of dignity.

The doctor looked ahead at the gleaming snow-covered road in front of them. "Does he know you are pregnant?" he asked curtly.

"Oh no, no! He doesn't even suspect." She clasped and unclasped her hands in utter distress. "Please, please, Dr. Elliott!"

But the voice went on grimly.

"I think he ought to be told, that is—as soon as he is well enough to hear it."

She uttered a stifled cry. Then gathered her forces together with hysterical strength.

"You don't understand the circumstances! I simply could not tell him now," she cried with suppressed passion.

"Don't you love him?" probed the voice.

Head sunk upon her chest, a tempestuous wave of scarlet flooded Claire's face and neck.

"Yes." The word was barely audible.

The doctor's eyes rested upon her with veiled pity. So there was another woman, was there?

"Would you like me to tell him for you?" he persisted more gently.

Regardless of the wheel, Claire grasped his arm convulsively. "I cannot bear this," she moaned. "Dr. Elliott, I don't want to go any further. Will you please take me home?"

He drove to the side of the road and stopped the car. Eyes averted from her tortured face, he spoke gravely.

"Mrs. Petrovsky, I hope you will forgive me for being so rough. But I am only trying to help you, in my clumsy way. I have seen from the first that things were not right with you, and I thought that if you could bring yourself to speak out, it would help you. I am your doctor, you know. And a doctor is in his own manner a species of father confessor. But I see that I have made a mistake, and a perfect brute of myself besides. If I promise not to mention the subject again, will you try to forgive me?"

His sincerity touched her. With an attempt at a smile, she laid her hand upon his sleeve.

"Of course, I will! I realized all along that you were trying to help me, that it wasn't just idle curiosity on your part."

"I should hope not," he muttered fervently.

"But I just couldn't act any differently. I seem to be tied up in double bow-knots. You understand, don't you?"

Her ardent little face pleaded. The wistful eyes sought his evasive gaze. As he met them his heart contracted. An amazing childish desire to cry suddenly came over him. Damn it, the girl had no business to be so pathetic!

He caught the groping hand and squeezed it fraternally.

"Let's let bygones be bygones," he replied. "But if you still wish it, I'll drive you directly home. However, the Gramatan Inn is much nearer and I'm a starving man. Won't you change your mind and have lunch with me?"

He looked so eager and boyish that she hated to refuse him.

"I'm not very hungry," she ventured doubtfully.

"Oh, but you will be! I'll wrap the rug about you tightly and open the window, and by the time we get there you'll be ready to eat shoe leather."

"Very well," she smiled at him faintly, as he opened the window and tucked the bearskin robe about her. "But will they allow Bébé in the dining room?" She clutched weakly at a last hope.

"We'll smuggle him under my coat, that'll be half the fun! And if they put us out, that will be still more fun!"

His unaffected gayety was contagious.

"You are grimly determined to have a good time, whatever happens, aren't you?" she said with an ironic lift of the delicate brows.

They glided back on to the road.

"It isn't every day I have lunch with a pretty girl. My Sundays are lonesome and monotonous," replied the doctor simply.

Claire looked at him in amazement.

"A pretty girl!" she stammered almost indignantly. That was trying to humor her a little too far!

His eyes met her hurt gaze with unfeigned astonishment.

"What's the matter? Have I offended again?" he asked quietly.

"I'd like you better if you didn't pretend that I was pretty, that's all," said Claire somberly. "Nobody knows better than I what a plain, insignificant creature I am."

"You are neither plain nor insignificant," he replied crossly. "And I'm not the kind of man to say what I don't mean."

Claire flushed painfully at her lack of *savoir faire*.

"Please forgive me, Dr. Elliott. I don't seem to know how to take things lightly any more."

He smiled sideways at her.

"We seem to do nothing but quarrel and make up like a pair of kids! But how about the appetite? For here we are!"

They had entered Bronxville, and the Gramatan Inn loomed benevolently over them from the top of its comfortable little hill.

"How pretty!" exclaimed Claire, jumping out of the car almost briskly. "Quite English, isn't it?"

He noticed her animated face with secret pleasure.

"Tries to be," laughed he. "Where's the flea? Let's hide him under my coat."

Claire looked surprised, then nodded understanding.

"Oh, you mean Bébé!" She handed him the little dog laughingly. "Remember, if the flea bites, you mustn't scratch!"

But the waiter was kind, and as the dining-room was almost empty, permitted the beastie a chair between them.

At lunch the gayety was somewhat forced. Claire ate as much as she could of the beefsteak and baked potatoes upon which the doctor insisted. (Her tentative order of chicken-pattie and tea had been vigorously pooh-poohed. Why did women persist in poisoning themselves?) But the food choked her as usual, and her pretense at appetite was only too transparent.

The man watched her beneath thoughtful brows. What sort of a brute could Petrovsky be to neglect a pathetic creature like that? He ought to be kicked. He, Robert Elliott, would like to do the kicking. These artists were all damned neurotics anyway. No healthy, red blood in 'em. He'd like to show him! Yes, by Jove, he'd like to—but what was the use of ranting around like a movie hero? The girl was evidently infatuated, and no amount of kicking, metaphorical or physical, would alter the fact. Meanwhile, her need of distraction and companionship was imperative. She was obviously suffering from an inferiority complex of long standing. A complex probably based on the small nothings which sometimes take so deep a root in sensitive natures. Perhaps with gayety and self-confidence and a knowledge of dress she might have held even the odious Petrovsky. But was such a man worth holding? And why did women cling so rapaciously to men like that? He shrugged mentally. (Anything so Continental as a physical shrug would have been impossible for Robert Elliott).

Claire made a feeble effort to talk. One must be polite to one's host. But she was wondering if she should not offer to pay for her own lunch. She did not know how to broach the subject without hurting Dr. Elliott's feelings. He looked so young, she was sure he must be poor. Young doctors were always poor, and equally sensitive.

"Are you a New York man?" she inquired diffidently.

He shook his head.

"I should say not. These Easterners get my goat. No, I'm from what the novelists call the Great Middlewest, Main Street and all that bunk, you know. Some time I intend going back to practice in Chicago."

Claire nodded politely.

"Did you go to medical school here in the East?"

Dr. Elliott nodded. "Yes, you see I was lucky enough to win a scholarship. That led to an internship, too, and then I decided to stay on for a while. But I hope to clean up in about a year."

"Clean up?" Claire looked surprised.

He laughed.

"Finish. You don't understand my argot, do you? I must seem an awful roughneck to you."

Claire smiled delightedly.

"Roughneck? No, indeed you don't! You see I know what that means! I like the way you talk. It sounds so eager and interested and young. Most of the people I see are a good deal older. You are very refreshing."

"You are quaint," he laughed. "One would think you were an old lady instead of a baby! Why, you look so young you ought to have a wet nurse."

She turned scarlet at his unconscious reminder of her state. How beautifully simple the man was!

"I'm not very old," she said hastily, in order to cover her confusion. "Only twenty-two. But it feels like a thousand." Her involuntary sigh was full of weariness.

He patted her hand, as it idly crumbled the bread upon her plate.

"Poor kid!"

Then his eyes lighted daringly.

"Don't you think you'd feel less aged if you wore a more youthful hat?"

She looked at him in utter surprise.

"Don't you like my hat?" Her tone was wistful.

"Isn't it a trifle middle-aged?" he replied cautiously. "Your face is so small and pale, it sort of broods over it, like a hen sitting on an egg. Why don't you get yourself something flapperish with a little color in it?"

Claire drew a puzzled breath.

"Somehow I never thought that was my style. And color makes me look paler than ever."

"That's easily remedied. Plenty of good food, fresh air, sleep, and no worry."

Claire's smile was a trifle rueful. "Haven't I heard that prescription before, Dr. Elliott?" she inquired

somewhat dryly.

His brilliant teeth flashed out from out the dark face.

"I'll admit it's a bromide. But just to prove I'm not an old fogey, I'll give you a prescription after lunch which will work wonders before your very eyes. No—it's not a flask." He laughed as her puzzled gaze rested upon his hip pocket. "Although I've been known to recommend that at times. And now, how about some ice-cream?"

Claire shook her head decidedly.

"Oh, no, I couldn't, Dr. Elliot. I feel like a Strassbourg goose, as it is."

"About as crowded as the corner of Fifth Avenue and 42d Street? Well, I won't insist. You've been a pretty good little lady. But remember, no tea, no coffee, no chicken patties when I'm not around. Beefsteak, baked potatoes, spinach, etc. Is it a promise?" He held out a solemn hand across the table.

"Yes," she placed her fingers in his somewhat timidly. "I promise. And now how about the prescription?"

He released her and rising to his feet helped her on with her coat, a long, expensive moleskin, which accentuated the slight sallowness of her complexion.

"Promise to take it, no matter how obnoxious?" he admonished, finger in the air.

"Is it castor-oil?" Her smile was almost roguish.

"No, I'm not as cold blooded as you think!" he replied with mock gravity. "Follow me down to the drug store and you'll see."

Picking up Béb , who had fed bountifully off the scraps, he led the way downstairs.

The prescription was contained in a tiny red leather box.

"Why, it looks like rouge!" exclaimed Claire in a horrified tone.

"Some call it so," said the doctor gayly. "But it would smell as sweet under any other name." He sniffed at it appreciatively. "Come now," he continued, utterly regardless of the clerk's amused eyes. "Come over to the light and we will proceed with the operation. Shall I have to use an an sthetic?"

"But I've never done such a thing in my life!" protested Claire vigorously.

"It's not at all difficult," he replied. "It only requires a delicate touch like mine (am I not a surgeon?) and presto! my lady blooms like a wild rose."

He brushed Claire's cheekbones lightly with the puff, adding a touch to the small pointed chin. Her lashes fluttering like the wings of a butterfly, Claire let him have his way.

He stepped back and looked at her admiringly.

"Did I say wild rose? It should have been tea rose. I am indeed an artist," he said softly, a new expression creeping into his honest eyes.

Claire gazed at herself in the tiny mirror. The change both frightened and delighted her.

"Don't you think it's wicked?—why, you'd never know it wasn't real!" she cried femininely.

"Of course not. But like all prescriptions it mustn't be overdone. It should be taken homeopathically, in microscopic doses."

"It makes me feel so daring," said Claire, as they emerged on to the street.

"That's just what you need," he replied promptly. "Audacity, more audacity, and still more audacity, as Balzac or some other old French geezer said."

The drive home was almost too short. Dr. Elliott talked of himself and his ambition, and Claire listened with real interest. It seemed obstetrics was to be his specialty, as it was obviously his god.

"You have no idea what a need there is for it in small towns," he told her enthusiastically. "The countless farmers' wives that could be saved if they had the proper attention! Pregnancy should be treated as a real sickness. If you leave it all to nature, the old lady goes about it in her usual, sloppy, destructive way. But give it the proper attention and it responds like a flash." He gave her a quick, piercing look. "Child-birth is no longer a bugaboo of the Old Testament, thanks to science, and I'm going to make it my business to prove it."

A little tremulous and self-conscious, Claire looked at him with trepidation. Would he be mentioning her own condition soon?

But he knew better than to do that. Gradually, the conversation became frivolous. Before she arrived home, Claire had not only promised to buy a new hat, but to buy it in his company.

"We will go to one of those places on 57th Street—you don't care what you pay, do you? They'll sting you, of course, but you'll get something snappy. Then we'll have lunch somewhere and if I can get off from the hospital, go to the matin e. How about it?"

Claire smiled happily. Then her expression became dubious. She was evidently screwing herself up to say something very difficult indeed.

"What's the matter? Shoot," said the doctor with twinkling eyes.

"Shoot? Oh, I see! Well, as a matter of fact, Dr. Elliott, I will go with you under one condition only."

"Name it."

"That you will allow me to pay my own way. I wouldn't enjoy it otherwise." Her eyes pleaded with him not to be offended.

He looked nonplussed for a moment, then nodded at her gravely.

"Very well, Mrs. Petrovskoy, if it would make you happier, we'll have it Dutch treat. But I'm not really quite as hard up as all that, you know."

They had arrived at her apartment, and he was helping her out of the car with his usual impersonal courtesy.

She flushed salmon pink beneath the touch of rouge.

"Please don't be hurt," she begged.

He smiled down at her.

"No one could be offended with a Greuze," he replied softly. "And you look just like one at this moment. How's that for highbrow?" he finished, with a faint attempt at lightness.

But the words sank deep, carrying balm, into Claire's wounded heart.

When Mme. Petrovskoy encountered her a few moments later as she entered the apartment, she could hardly believe her eyes.

"The cold air has given you quite a flush," she said graciously for her. "Where have you been? Ito was worried because you didn't return for lunch."

(Ito had worried! Claire shrugged with amusement, and yet how that remark might have hurt a few short hours ago!)

"I met Dr. Elliott in the park, and he took me to the Gramatan Inn in Bronxville for lunch."

Mme. Petrovsky raised dumbfounded brows. Then her expression changed suddenly. The small eyes became non-committal slits. She smiled suavely.

"Dr. Elliott? How nice! Do you like him?"

She watched Claire narrowly as she spoke.

"Yes, very much," said the girl naïvely. "I promised to go out to the theater with him next week."

"That's right. You might as well amuse yourself," said her mother-in-law carelessly, "seeing Alexis is taken care of. By the way, has Mrs. Schuyler a husband?"

Claire turned away to hide her smitten face.

"No, I believe she's a widow." Her voice was harsh.

"Ah!"

Mme. Petrovsky drew a long, hissing breath. "She seems to be very well off, doesn't she?" she persisted.

"Very," said Claire shortly. A vision of Anne, jeweled and sumptuous in the Kolinsky evening wrap rose before her aching eyes. "I think if you don't mind. I'll go to my room and lie down a little while."

She turned and walked down the long hall.

Mme. Petrovsky's voice followed her almost caressingly.

"Of course not, dear child. That's right, take care of yourself. You're looking so much better already. I think Dr. Elliott (is that the young man's name?) is quite a treasure. We must cultivate him, my dear."

CHAPTER XIV

RAPTURE

Mac Dougal Alley on a black, starless night was quite Hogarthian, decided the Marchese, as he pressed Ellen's doorbell, the ultra-chic in slums! He encountered the fathomless black eyes of the Chinese girl who admitted him, with a smile. What a white, round face, like an enigmatic moon. Did it conceal a personality as void as that lifeless planet? The gorgeous little figure preceded him into the house. He looked about him with amusement.

A diminutive hall had been rendered significant, not to say sinister, by being lined to the ceiling by large black and white tiles, and encircled by a Gauguinesque frieze, negroid and undefinably lecherous. By the door, two grinning sable cats supported a black marble bench. Leaving hat and coat in their guardianship, the Marchese entered the drawing room.

It was like going into a twilight grotto. Everything from heavy brocaded hangings to the deep pile carpet, dripped lavender. One felt as if one were treading upon crushed violets. Torrigiani sank down upon a lavender sofa and stared aghast into the expressionless eyes of a slightly soiled nude over the black marble fireplace. Her eyes look like tired oysters, he thought, his mind wandering emptily. And the room about as cheerful as the inside of a casket, done by an expensive and lady-like undertaker. The candle in the tall bracket by his side guttered audibly. He started. Where the devil was everybody? He had understood it was to be a large party. Surely he was not ahead of time? No, for the large black clock was tolling a quarter past eight, and was not that the voice of his hostess?

He rose and walked towards the door. Somber draperies hanging from white shoulders, Ellen strolled into the room elaborately languid, as usual.

"Ah, Marchese, I see you are admiring my little nest," she drawled. He bent over her hand.

"I am speechless," he murmured. "It is utterly beyond my poor comprehension. I feel like the intruding cuckoo."

With a purring laugh, she laid her hand upon his arm and led him back to the sofa.

"You are a flatterer, like all foreigners. That is why we adore you so. But confess, it's not much like your palaces?"

She leaned forward. Her heavy perfume swept over him with the intimacy of a caress. He recoiled imperceptibly.

"My dear lady, our palaces are only called so by courtesy. Compared to your American houses, they are barracks. We may have a few treasures, but"—he hesitated, his eyes twinkling enigmatically. "No such taste, I assure you."

Ellen laughed.

"Confess you think it is all atrocious? But it is only a fad. You mustn't take this too seriously. A year from now the whole thing will probably be done over in flaming scarlet, festooned with monkeys and coconuts."

"In a species of inverse evolution, I suppose?" His comical expression sat upon him gayly.

The exotic little Chinese entered with cocktails. Torrigiani noted with dismay that there were only two glasses. Was the *tête-à-tête* to endure all evening? His raised eyebrows piqued Ellen. She answered his unspoken question with gay malice.

"Yes, we are to be alone. I wanted to have you all to myself. Am I not selfish?" She handed him his cocktail with a queenly gesture and smiled languidly into his noncommittal eyes.

"Delightfully so!" he bowed ceremoniously over the small jade cup.

"*Quel beau geste!* Confess you were expecting to meet Anne here!" Below their somnolent surface, her eyes searched him.

He laughed warily.

"I'll confess my expectations did not rise to a *tête-à-tête*. I feel decidedly flattered." His ironic gaze mocked her politely over the rim of the cocktail.

She swept to her feet and led him toward the Gothic archway at the end of the room.

"The beautiful solitude will only last during dinner." She smiled at him over a massive shoulder. "After that, the usual horde will probably invade. So we must make the most of our time."

Torigiani's heart leapt upwards once more. So there was to be a crowd after all? Was Anne to make one of them? Or would she disappoint him again, as she had this afternoon? It was the first time she had ever broken an engagement, and his spirit still smarted from the defection.

With a lighter step he followed his hostess. Stopping at the threshold of the dining room, he exclaimed with involuntary admiration.

The white-washed walls of the small square room were covered with varicolored caricatures of Ellen and the numberless notorieties who formed the horde. They sprawled from paneled baseboard to black oaken ceiling, lurid and ludicrous. Intimate smile and gesture captured in ruthless hyperbole.

"I never saw anything so original in my life! It makes one think of a curtain from the *Chauve Souris!*"

The Marchese went close to the wall and scanned it eagerly. Although his knowledge of New York celebrities was limited, he found several whom he recognized. Their names fell off his lips with a small fanfare of triumph.

His childish pleasure amused Ellen. She stepped to his side and pointed out several more, including herself as Juliet. "I was dismal in that," she remarked plaintively. "Even the Shakespearian flapper doesn't suit my style."

Running her finger along the painted faces, she let it rest upon a gorgeous blonde with Titian hair and a glassy eye and smile. "Who's that?" she queried, with a mocking air.

For a moment he looked incredulous.

"Not—not Anne?" he begged. The ghastly similitude smote ludicrously.

"You have said it. Isn't she dazzling, like a Pepsodent advertisement, or the 'only one out of five' who escaped pyorrhea?" Ellen laughed loudly.

"It's blasphemy, pure and simple! And neither simple nor pure. Your artist ought to be hung for libel."

They went to the table and he seated her. It was one of those narrow, casket-like affairs with large candles at the head and foot and an artificial spray of diseased-looking orchids sprawling over the center.

The Chinese girl, supplemented by an equally-gorgeous twin, passed *hors d'œuvres*. He helped himself to truffles in aspic and caught Ellen's gaze resting upon him maliciously from the other end of the table.

"Where did you and Anne go last night?" she flashed.

He returned her stare blankly. "Why, nowhere, of course," he replied. "Why do you ask?"

Ellen's eyes glowed in the candle-light. "You needn't expect me to believe that! Gerald and I knew you were up to something. But it was a dirty trick to desert us like that at the last minute! The evening was a mess."

She glared at him rapaciously, as if she were trying to suck his secret from him with her eyes. Almost too astonished to speak, he returned her strange look unflinchingly.

"Didn't you get my telephone message?"

"Oh, that! Of course. But it's such an old trick! A sick friend wanting Anne at the last minute. It was so very transparent. Things simply don't happen like that!"

He contained his anger with difficulty.

"You are a very astute lady, but this time a mistaken one, as well," he replied quietly. "Mrs. Schuyler actually did go to a sick friend, and I myself put her into her car and saw her off before telephoning you."

Ellen opened sleepy eyes. So it was true, after all?

"But who was it? Who is ill?" she inquired eagerly.

One of the exotic twins removed the *hors d'œuvres*.

"I don't know," replied the Marchese curtly. "But as we were about to get into Mrs. Schuyler's car to join you" (he emphasized the last three words with a little bow), "a taxi drove up to the curb and a young girl jumped out, ran up to Anne, and said something I did not quite catch about somebody being very ill and calling for her constantly. So Anne went with her, of course. What else could she do?"

"And left you on the curb? Chewing your mustache in a properly thwarted manner!" capped Ellen, exhibiting a masterly knowledge of histrionics.

"Exactly." His smile was rueful.

Ellen's expression became rapt. Lighting a cigarette, she leaned back and puffed at it furiously.

"Who could it have been?" she helped herself to the artichokes. Then her whole face lightened with the dawn of a sudden idea. "I have it!" She looked at Torrigiani gleefully. "I tell you I have it!"

His composed face betrayed small interest. Holding his glass of Château Yquem up against the light he studied it intently.

"What a marvelous wine." His hand trembled as he let the glass down again with a slight jar.

Ellen interrupted him ruthlessly.

"It must have been Alexis Petrovsky," she cried triumphantly.

His olive skin paled a trifle.

"Alexis Petrovsky, the violinist?" His voice was studiously calm. "But weren't the papers full of his disappearance a while ago?"

She nodded joyfully. "The same! And thereby hangs the tale! As a matter of fact, he did run away from his sanitarium, but he is back again now, hiding behind Anne's skirts."

The Marchese winced. He was a little off his guard.

"But I don't understand. When did Anne meet this—person? She has never mentioned him to me."

She nodded wisely.

"Of course not. Why should she mention him? The whole thing was rather an adventure, you know, for a white, woolly lamb like Anne!"

"Are you insinuating anything?" His tone was cold.

Ellen leaned her elbows comfortably upon the table, while she munched at an olive. "Now don't get cross," she said smoothly. "I'm only repeating what Anne told me herself. And you can hardly call that gossip, can you?"

He shook his head. "Hardly."

"Well, it seems that this Autumn, when she was up in the Adirondacks alone with Regina, she came upon Petrovsky one day in the woods. He was wandering about, half out of his mind with fatigue. (He had escaped from the sanitarium, or was it the lunatic asylum?) She felt so sorry for him that she took him back with her to the lodge and they spent the next ten days there together."

His pale face became crimson.

"How did Anne happen to tell you this?" The sight of the food on his plate suddenly nauseated him. He pushed it a little to one side.

Ellen looked at him with gentle reproach.

"You don't trust me, do you?" she wailed. "Well, if you want to know the truth——"

(What else should I want to know, he thought savagely?)

"I found him up in her sitting-room the night she arrived home. The first time you and I met each other, do you remember?"

Her eyes pleaded in vain. He nodded shortly.

"I have not forgotten."

Ellen's tongue passed over encrimsoned lips. "Well, she tried to pass him off as a legal adviser or something. But I knew better. I recognized him the minute I entered the room! So of course I told them so! Later, when we were alone I wormed it all out of Anne. It's quite simple, you see."

"Quite! What sort of fellow is this Petrovsky? I've never had the pleasure of hearing him play."

Ellen smiled reminiscently.

"Perfectly fascinating, in a haggard way! And the rudest thing! He would have enjoyed killing me, I know!"

"How can you say such a thing!" Torrigiani laughed wryly. "The fellow is probably in love with you like all the rest of us."

She shook a finger at him.

"You're an insinuating wretch! I only wish you were right. I'd adore to have a genius like that in love with me, even if he is a nut. But he's so crazy about Anne that he can't see straight. I'm sure I don't know what's going to happen!"

Vittorio's heart skipped a beat. "Is this interesting affection mutual?"

"Oh, I hope not. He would make a terrible husband. So egotistical, you know."

Husband! The Marchese's knuckles showed white about his wine-glass.

"And he is much younger than she!" Ellen's eyes rested upon him blandly. "At least ten years. But you never can tell what a woman will do when she is infatuated!"

He gathered himself together.

"Aren't you exaggerating a little? Mrs. Schuyler has hardly reached the foolish age as yet. I'm positive she wouldn't dream of marrying a man younger than herself!"

"Such things have happened!" Ellen's shrug was eloquent. "Shall we take our coffee in the other room? I believe I hear voices."

He followed her trailing draperies out of the room with unutterable relief. Escape was imperative. He would seize the first opportunity that offered. In the drawing room several men were already grouped before the lugubrious mantel and Ellen's entrance was greeted vociferously. Sucking her into their midst, they circled about her like a black whirlpool.

Torrigiani was accosted by Gerald.

"Hello, Marchese, what are you doing in this *galère*?" His tired eyes expressed surprise at seeing Vittorio without Anne.

Torrigiani smiled politely.

"I don't belong, do I? As a matter of fact, I'm going on elsewhere immediately." He looked guiltily towards Ellen.

Gerald laughed. "Meditating escape? Well, I won't give you away."

They smoked in silence for a few moments.

"What do you think of the house?" Gerald waved a languid hand at the lavender walls.

"Remarkable!"

"But you ought to see the bathroom!" The tired eyes grinned salaciously. "Done in gold leaf with black frieze representing scenes from *'Le Roi Pausole.'* Hot tamale! Shall I show it to you?"

The Marchese declined hastily. Another time he would be only too pleased! At present he must make his adieux.

Threading his way through the small room, which was crowding rapidly, he bent over Ellen's large, white hand.

"Must you leave?" she laughed lazily, "and just as we are going to play Baccarat? What a shame. Give her my love!"

Torrigiani smiled back with well-bred insolence. "I prefer to keep it all myself!"

Outside, MacDougal's Alley was filled with quite un-Hogarthian motors. The air felt cold and sweet after the heavily perfumed house. And although his hotel was well up in the Fifties, Torrigiani decided to walk.

"Just one more spoonful. There, that's a good boy!" With a pleased expression, Anne laid the empty cup upon the night table. "Hot milk isn't so ghastly, after all, is it?"

Alexis shook his head. Upon his lips rode the ecstatic smile of a two-year old whose mother has just returned from the great unknown.

"Nectar," he whispered, above still-painful breathing.

She raised an admonishing finger. But her smile was compassionate.

"Don't talk. Remember your promise? If you break it, I shall have to go. Miss Wilson has come back for the night and she is very severe, you know."

He caught the reproving finger and pressed it against his cheek, where the bristly down of a new beard was forming. His eyes gleamed above the crimson cheek-bones.

"Anne, you are beautiful," he disobeyed. "Anne, I worship you."

She drew away her hand, and laid it reprovingly upon his laboring chest.

"I shall have to go, I see. Good-night, Alexis." She bent over him and brushed her lips across his forehead. "May your sleep bring health!" Unshed tears glittered upon her lashes.

He clutched at her skirts baby-wise. "Don't forget your promise," he whispered. "To come back when you are ready for bed with your hair down, just like last night?"

A flush swept over the ivory face, leaving it paler than before. "Oh, Alexis, must I?" she pleaded.

His nod was tyrannical.

She returned a few minutes later, swathed in the old-gold *saut-de-lit*.

"Well, here I am," she murmured from the threshold, feeling strangely brazen.

His arms leapt out to meet her, then fell disappointedly.

"But your hair," he muttered. "You haven't taken down your hair!"

"It occurred to me that you might like to do that yourself." She advanced and knelt beside the bed.

"Oh, yes—yes!"

For an ecstatic moment his trembling hands fumbled with the heavy pins. Then her hair, a rippling shower of perfumed copper, fell between them. With a gasp, Alexis laid his hands in it. Twisting a clinging lock about his fingers, he kissed it wildly. The tears starting beneath closed lids he fell back limply upon the bed.

A lump in her throat, Anne shook her head. "Alexis, this is bad for you. Let me go," she whispered in a frightened voice. Beneath the laboring chest his heart leapt up at her like a caged, thing. It made her afraid. "I must go."

"No, no," he whispered, "don't leave me, Anne. Let me die like this. It is too beautiful!"

With a smothered sob, she laid her wet cheek against his.

"No, no, you must live Alexis—you must live—for me."

He opened his eyes for the sheer wonder of it.

"Anne, do you mean it? Is it a promise?"

"Yes," her lips mumbled softly against his unshaven cheek. "It is a promise, my poor Alexis."

She unwound the lock from about his fingers. He did not protest, but only gazed up into her face pleadingly, like a sick child. "Must you go, Anne?"

She nodded speechlessly.

"Will you kiss me?"

With a little stifled cry of pity, she sank into the outstretched arms.

His scorched lips drank of her cool, soft mouth. She staggered to her feet and stood looking down upon him, encountering the dilated, rapturous gaze. Had she allowed him to become so excited that he might not sleep? She struggled gently to free her hands. "Good-night, Alexis," she insisted.

But he retained her hands with a new, convulsive force.

"No, no. You mustn't go," he reiterated. "Not now!"

He sat up in bed, and releasing her, pointed toward the studio.

"My violin—get it for me!" he whispered.

She stood aghast, feet glued to the floor.

"Your violin?" she muttered stupidly.

His quick gesture was full of anger.

"Yes, yes. Be quick before the music leaves me again! The violin's in the corner by the piano."

Her heart beating in great bounds, she brought him the instrument, and watched with brimming eyes while he placed it beneath his chin, and drew the bow in a great sweep over the strings.

It had all come back with new and overwhelming radiance.

As he broke into the Canzonetta from Tchaikowsky's concerto, Anne sank on to the foot of the bed with trembling knees.

When Miss Wilson, frightened, protesting, ran to the door, she stopped her with almost a disdainful gesture. It was her turn to command now. Let professional quibbling wait.

The music soared a rapturous, throbbing melody, then quavered suddenly into echoing silence—a silence that vibrated as if from invisible strings. The violin slipped from Alexis' fingers on to the bed. He fell back against his pillows and Anne thought that he had fainted.

But it was only a deep sleep into which the overwhelming wave of joy had suddenly plunged him. At least that was what Miss Wilson said, as she tucked the clothes up around the thin shoulders.

Rare tears coursing down her cheeks, Anne looked down upon Alexis. She lifted the violin from the bed, and putting it reverently into its case, tiptoed out of the room.

As she laid it upon the piano, she sank on to the bench with a little sobbing cry, her face buried in her hands.

"Thank God," she sobbed. "Thank God!"

Later, back in her alcove, she realized that mortal fatigue had suddenly fallen upon her. She crept wearily into the little day-bed and lay prostrate between marble-cool sheets. Would the tomb feel as cold, she wondered idly.

If Alexis recovers I am pledged.

Dawn thrust an ashen face against the window and found Anne milk-white, wide-eyed, lying within the brazen mantle of her hair.

"DUG DEEP INTO MY HEART—"

The sun was golden upon the paneled walls of Anne's gay little sitting room. In its uncompromising rays, Torrigiani's face shown drawn.

Anne looked at him remorsefully.

"Poor Vittorio, I'm not worth all this agony. Indeed, I'm not!"

"And I know I should not inflict it upon you." His troubled brown eyes rested upon her. "But if you knew what a horror I have gone through this week! Never in all the years that we have known each other have I doubted you, Anne. In spite of what people said (you yourself know only too well how you have always been talked about) my mother and I never have listened. You have always been my *Donna Immacolata* and always will remain so. Nobody but yourself could dispel my faith, and even then I should feel there had been a mistake somewhere. But this talk, this terrible talk of Ellen, even your letter doesn't explain it away entirely. I have come to you for the truth. Who is this man with whom you have been staying, Anne? And what is he to you?"

"He is Alexis Petrovsky, the violinist, and—and he is nothing to me—at present. He was very ill and I have been taking care of him. That is all."

She avoided the earnest, seeking eyes. A vivid crimson stained her cheek. In a tea-gown of peacock blue chiffon with transparent black lace sleeves, she was infinitely desirable.

Torrigiani drew his chair closer to hers. He searched her face wistfully.

"What do you mean he is nothing to you at present? Don't try to spare me, *carissima*. I want to know the truth."

She averted her head, and played nervously with the ends of her turquoise girdle.

"I scarcely know what I mean myself, Vittorio. It is impossible to foresee the future, you know. But—but as I said in my letter, he is very dependent upon my—my friendship. He says that it is I who have brought back his music. Did you know about his misfortune, his breakdown?"

Vittorio nodded.

"Yes, I read about it in the papers. So the music has come back to him, has it? Well, that is not so extraordinary, is it?" He felt his way. "Things like that usually do come back to one, after a certain time."

"Are you trying to say that I had nothing to do with it?"

"No, *cara*, of course not. Only I don't want you to feel too strong a responsibility for this young man. He is probably very much indebted to you, and without doubt very much in love. But are you positive that he needs you as much as he would like you to think?"

Anne's anger melted into unexpected amusement. She gestured with her cigarette. "How can I tell, Vittorio? But it really looks that way. If I don't go to see him twice a day, his fever rises and he refuses to eat. And when I first met him on the mountain, his condition was really pitiable. I know that I helped him then."

Her look of unconscious triumph wounded him to the marrow.

"Tell me about it, Anne. Is it true that he stayed ten days with you in the lodge?"

She met his eyes with renewed serenity.

"Yes, why not? He was alone and ill, and Regina and I took care of him. He didn't want to return to New York, as he was afraid the newspapers might get hold of it. So I let him stay with me,—*tout simplement*."

He looked as if a weight had been taken off his heart.

"But why did you not tell me, *cara*? That night when I teased you about fallen gods, I little guessed that you were concealing one up in your sitting room. That at that very moment he was toasting those feet of clay at your fireplace. If any one had told me so, I would have laughed in his face. I always thought you scorned underhand methods. It was not like you at all!"

"Of course it wasn't. But how could I help it? It was his secret, not mine. As a matter of fact, he didn't arrive until long after our conversation took place. He didn't want to be seen, so I had to hide him. I didn't enjoy it. I hate subterfuge, as you know. If I hadn't always been so aboveboard, there would have been less talk about me. No one knows it better than I do! And now the first time that I have stooped to such methods, everybody puts a false construction upon it."

"Except myself, Anne. I know you too well. You would never do anything beneath you."

She flicked her ashes into the grate rather nervously. "Then you know me better than I do myself!"

He leaned towards her, deeply troubled.

"What is the matter, Anne? Won't you tell me, dear? You're so different from your former self, so unapproachable. So almost irritable. Are you unhappy about this man? Do you care for him, perhaps? Has love finally come to you after all these years?"

Again she avoided the earnest gaze. "I don't know. I—I'm afraid not."

"You don't know?" he stammered.

"No." The word came draggingly from pale lips.

"But what is it, dear one? Do you intend to marry this boy? Is that why you say you are afraid?"

"No." Once more the monosyllable was barely audible. Then she turned and faced the honest eyes squarely.

"I cannot marry Alexis even if I want to. He has a wife already!"

"Ah!" he breathed painfully. "I understand. And yet you love him, my poor Anne? He—he is your lover?"

She shook her head. The firelight leapt up the ivory column of her throat, tinting her hair with living gold.

"No—not yet, Vittorio."

He uttered a low cry almost of joy.

"Thank God! Then it's not too late. Ah, Anne, think what it would mean to you to take a lover, you to whom marriage was a crucifixion! Have you forgotten our long talks in the garden? How often you have confided to me your horror of contact? That is why you have always refused to marry again? Even me, your very oldest friend! How could you bear it, then, to have a lover?"

Her face cupped within her hands, Anne gazed into the fire.

"Don't make it too hard for me, Vittorio. Let me explain."

He broke in quickly.

"No explanation is necessary. You love at last. And when a woman like you loves, she surrenders all. But think well. The ignoble does not suit you. Your love will not survive it. You will lose caste in your own eyes—you will be talked about—whispered about—"

Anne laughed grimly. "Talked about, whispered about! Am I not accustomed to that!"

"Ah, that was different, beneath your notice. Only the truth can sting a woman like you. Anne, believe me, if you take a lover you will be very unhappy, I—I dread to think of it." He bowed his head upon the mantel.

She rose, and approaching him, laid her hand upon his thick, black hair.

"Poor Vittorio, how good you are to me. Much, much too good!"

"I good to you?" he turned beneath the caressing fingers and looked at her in surprise. "But I love you. I would do anything to prevent your suffering. If you will only marry me now, before it is too late, I promise never to demand anything for myself. We will go first to Mexico if you like, and then back home to Italy. It will be just the same as ever between us, only I shall be there to protect you. And with change of scene and distance you will forget all this madness."

She shook her head dully.

"Oh, no, it is impossible, dear. But why Mexico?" she asked, momentarily diverted.

"Because I want to explore some of the ruins down there. And it is another Egypt, you know, as the idyllic guide books put it. It seems to me that a honeymoon in Mexico, even only a fraternal one," he added hastily, "would be heavenly."

With a little moan she turned away and sank into a chair.

"But I can't. You don't understand. I'm no longer free. I have promised. If I break my word now I don't know what will happen to Alexis. He is still very ill. He might lose his music forever, or even die."

Torrigiani turned about slowly and looked down upon her bowed head. "Do you love this man, Anne?" he inquired with a commanding note in his voice.

Her head thrown wearily against the chair-back, she shook it dully.

"I told you before that I didn't know, Vittorio."

He mused down upon her darkly.

"Then it is even worse than I feared. If you had loved him, a certain rapture might have repaid the sacrifice. But if it is only pity! Why, Anne, if it is merely pity, why don't you take it out on me? Surely, I deserve it after all these years. Am I not equally an object for charity?"

He knelt beside the chair and grasped her hands.

"Ah, but you are a man, Vittorio. Able to stand upon your own feet. He is only a sick boy, an artist, whose art, his only reason for living, had deserted him until only the other day. And I—I seem to be able to help. If I stay by him, it may never leave him again."

He dropped her hands and rose. His face took on a hard expression, utterly foreign to him. He laughed shortly.

"I see he has appealed to the maternal, the protective instinct. He is clever, if weak. But is the game worth the candle?"

She sighed, and spread her hands in a weary, undecided gesture.

"Is any game worth the candle, Vittorio, if you weigh the wax? But if I can help him to get on his feet again, if I can bring his art back again, I shall feel as if I had been of some use in the world at last."

Vittorio's expression became almost a grimace. The curt laugh rang out harshly.

"Aha, it is the old music complex, is it? So we have put our finger upon the little, hungry place that shrieks for fame. Anne, the most exquisite amateur in the world, prefers vicarious success to none at all!"

Her anger melted as she met his suffering eyes.

"That is rather brutal, Vittorio, but very possibly true. Whatever my motive is, the fact remains that I am pledged."

Her weary candor disarmed him. He stooped and placed his hand upon hers.

"*Carissima*, it is not yet too late. No man, especially no genius, is worth the sacrifice you intend making. Let him go his own way. After all, one musician more or less will make no great difference to the world, which is well stocked with such as he. But women like you are rare."

She looked up at him impatiently. "Oh, Vittorio, why do you insist upon placing me on a pedestal? If I am chaste, it is not from principle, but from—repulsion." She shivered a little. "After all, I'm not a virgin being thrown to the minotaur, you know." Her laugh was unsteady.

She clasped her hands more firmly.

"But what is there about this man which persuades you against your shrinking flesh? What spell has he cast over you that the rest of us have neglected?"

Anne removed her hands from his hold and pressed them to her breast, in a dramatic gesture, unlike herself.

"It is here that he gets me. His pitifulness has dug deep into my heart. To cast him away would be like refusing to suckle a starving baby when one's breast was swollen with milk."

She suddenly raised her hands to her face and Torrigiani saw that she was weeping. He cried out in dismay.

"Anne, Anne, don't cry like that, *carissima*! Why, I've never seen you cry before! If I have offended, please forgive me. I will go away. I will do anything in the world if only you will stop crying!"

Tears trickling through the slim, white fingers, she nodded her head.

"Yes, go, Vittorio, dear Vittorio. You can do nothing to change me now, and I cannot bear to hurt you so. Perhaps it would be better if we should never see each other again."

Her voice broke. She turned away her head. He put his arms about her trembling shoulders and pressed her to his heart.

"No, Anne, that could never be. It is meant that I should love you forever. I will go away—but I shall return. If everything has become too much for you, let me know, and I will come. No matter if it is from Africa. And never forget Anna *mia*, that my offer holds good forever!"

Her head against his shoulder, she stirred uneasily. "Forever? But you forget, Vittorio, that—that I—that things will not be the same?"

He trembled as the copper tendrils of her hair swept against his cheek.

"I forget—nothing. In the things of the body, it is only the spirit which counts."

She raised her head from his shoulder and looked at him from under heavy lids. "How good you are, Vittorio!" she repeated chokingly. Taking his head between her hands, she pressed her lips upon his. "And now, good-by."

He held her away from him, and looked lingeringly into her face. A cry escaped him.

"Good-by, my Anne, good-by."

He released her, and without turning his head, walked swiftly towards the door and closed it quietly behind him.

Anne looked after him dully. An odd pain tugged at her heart. The room became strangely vacant. Deserted by the winter sun, paneled walls gleamed wanly. Upon the hearth, the fire lay smothered within its own embers.

What had she done?

A landmark had been reached and passed; a turning taken. The homely, the familiar highroad lay behind. The perilous forest closed in upon her darkly.

With a weary movement she raised her bare arms above her head, and let them fall heavily against her sides.

The ivory clock upon the mantel chanted five mellow notes.

Anne started up from her chair. It was the hour for the daily visit to Alexis.

CHAPTER XVI

IRREVOCABLE

Heart thudding against her ribs, Claire advanced into the room. Ever since she had received Alexis' letter asking her to come and see him she had lived for this moment alone. And yet, now that it was upon her, she was conscious only of a cold dread, a dreary fear. Her last glimpse of Alexis had been in the clutches of delirium. He had then been calling frantically upon the name of another woman. Much water had passed beneath the bridges since, congealed, stagnant water, bitter as the unshed tears lying so heavily upon her heart.

She advanced timidly into the room and Alexis rose to greet her. A wine-colored lounging robe enhanced his fairness. The smile upon his lips was both pathetic and perfunctory. Taking her proffered hand, he led Claire to a chair. For a moment they gazed at each other self-consciously.

"This is good of you, Claire, I know I don't deserve it," he said finally.

She smiled sturdily beneath her tears.

"You asked me to come, didn't you? That is why I am here. I am glad you are better, Alexis."

"Oh, I'm practically well now. I expect to go out again in a few days."

She noticed that he ignored the beginning of her sentence and his embarrassment touched her. She looked about the room in search of a topic of conversation. Her absent eyes fell upon several large jars filled with flowers. "What lovely roses, and what masses of them!" she exclaimed impulsively. Then could have bitten out her tongue. Had they perhaps been sent by Mrs. Schuyler?

A triumphant gleam swept over his face. He forgot to be self-conscious.

"Yes, aren't they wonderful! It's quite like the old days, isn't it? You see, Claire, I—I am discovered!"

"You are discovered?" she stammered.

He ran a hand through his tumbled hair with the old arrogant gesture.

"Yes, my return has leaked out somehow the last few days, and although it hasn't appeared in the papers as yet, the exciting fact seems to have spread rather swiftly."

Within her lap Claire's gloved hands tightened upon each other. "Are—are you glad, Alexis?" her voice faltered.

He laughed oddly. "Am I human, Claire?"

"Yes, yes, I know! But don't you dread having them find out?"

He looked at her in angry bewilderment.

"Find out what?" Could she be alluding to Anne?

"Why, that you have forgotten how to play," she murmured almost in tears.

He sprang up and loomed over her with the air of a young god. His hands upon her slight shoulders, he shook her gently.

"Ah, but it has come back, Claire. It came back like a flash, just as suddenly as it left me. Listen!"

He strode over to the piano, and taking his violin out of the case, fingered it caressingly.

"Of course, they won't let me practice yet. And I am all thumbs. But listen!"

Violin nestled beneath his chin, he began to play. Superlatively toned, the instrument hummed beneath his sweeping bow like a human thing. The penetrating sweetness pierced Claire's heart. It sang a plaintive melody, simple as an ancient love song. The mellow tones rose higher and higher, finally repeating themselves in head notes clear and brittle as crystal. As the last note shrilled lingeringly upon the air, Claire smiled through tears into Alexis' exalted face.

"Oh, Alexis, how happy I am for you! Shall you play in public again soon?"

He replaced the violin within its case, and crossing the room sat down beside her. "I hope to be ready for a recital the middle of January. From now on I shall practice every moment. Do you remember my old manager, Rosenfield? I've engaged him again. Funny fellow, but enthusiastic as ever."

"Have you made any special plans?" Claire's voice was strained. Would he never come to the point?

"Well," he hesitated a moment, dreading how she might take what he was going to say, "Yes, I have. The doctors wanted me to go South for the rest of the winter, but I couldn't bear to go away so far from" he faltered a little—"so far from New York and Rosenfield. I'm so anxious to get to work again. So we compromised on Long Island. The air is wonderful there. I have taken Karzimova's house, the Russian actress, you know, until the first of May. It is an Italian villa, and rather gorgeous. She didn't want to rent it, although she is in Europe, but when they cabled her who I was and that I had been ill, she gave in rather graciously, and let me have it for a ridiculous price. They say she is mad about music."

So this was what she had come to hear? She was to lose Alexis entirely, then?

"When are you moving out?"

"In about a week, I believe. Don't you think it is the best thing I can do?"

"Oh, Alexis, if you are happy, what more can I ask?" Her brimming eyes touched him to the quick.

"Little Claire, what a gentle thing you are. Far too dear for an egotistical brute like me." He touched her gloved hand, and gazed down at her stormily. He noted with surprise that she was looking almost pretty. Her hat was actually becoming, and the long earrings lent her an elfin charm. What had she been doing to herself? Was the pathetic desire to attract him at the root of the change? The tragedy of it! Was it possible that he had ever possessed this girl, of whose body he retained scarcely a recollection? The very thought seemed incestuous. She was not a woman but a sister. The little Claire of nursery days, the older Claire of flushed cheeks and timid ardors, yes, her image was still vivid, and even dear, so intermingled with her companionship were his earliest recollections. But Claire, the wife of a few hectic months, the submissive puppet of rare and intermittent contacts, was unthinkable. She had existed only within the hideous confines of his disordered brain.

His silence, his gaze filled Claire with horrible confusion. She blushed crimson. Within the hurricane

of his glance her soul shivered, exposed, naked. What blasting thought, what ignoble memory lurked behind those stormy eyes? Shame seared her as with a hot iron. Yet her surrender had been as pure as it had been entire. Was she not Alexis' wife? Bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh? Did not she carry within her body his seed? With a heroic effort, she raised her head and their eyes clashed.

"What are you thinking of?" she inquired with a quiet hauteur, which surprised him.

His answer skirted the truth warily.

"That you should never have married me, Claire. We shall never be happy together. It was all a horrible mistake. Let us undo it, dear."

"I cannot divorce you, if that is what you mean." Her hands were clasped convulsively upon each other.

"But, Claire, we do not love each other. I—I—" he faltered.

"Yes, I know, you love another woman. You don't have to tell me that, Alexis." Her smile was grim.

"But, I want to marry her," he blurted cruelly. "You must divorce me, Claire."

The searing crimson drained from her face, leaving it the livid hue of marble.

"We are husband and wife, Alexis. No human being can undo that now."

He sprang out of the chair and strode up and down the room.

"That *toqué* idea of yours! The idea is mediæval and has died out like a thousand other superstitions."

"Not among the Roman Catholics, Alexis!" Her eyes begged for mercy.

"Oh, Claire, be reasonable. Be up to date. These aren't the Dark Ages!"

"Oh, poor Alexis." Claire covered her face with trembling fingers. "Is it as bad as all that? But you know I have already told you, you can have a separation any time you wish. I will go away, far away. You need never see me again!" Her voice ended with a sob.

Struck with remorse, he looked down upon her haggardly.

"What an utter brute I am. But don't you see? It is partly for your sake, too. Suppose you should meet some one else who could really make you happy? Some one good, some one entirely different from me. Wouldn't it be a tragedy if just because a few words had been mumbled over us by an unknown priest, you couldn't marry this other man more suited to you in every way than I am?"

"But it isn't the priest who mumbles the formula that counts. He is only an instrument. It is the spirit behind it all. We swore before God in his house to remain together until death us do part. It was a sacred oath. Nothing but death can dissolve it."

"If you swore to remain with me until death, why are you willing to have a separation? Isn't that against your principles, too?"

His irony cut her to the quick.

"I cannot remain with a man who does not love me," she replied quietly, "any more than I could live with any other."

"And supposing I love some one else and want to marry her?"

"It would be impossible. It wouldn't be legal."

"But I am neither Roman Catholic, nor Unitarian. I wear no label or tag of any sort, thank the pagan gods. And as I do happen to want to marry another woman, I warn you now that if you refuse to get a divorce against me, I shall do something desperate."

"Alexis, Alexis!" The tortured cry sprang from her involuntarily. "What can I do? I am ready to die to make you happy, but I cannot consent to a divorce. It would be a sin. A living lie!"

"A sin! A living lie! That is all cant and gibberish. I was sorry for you a while ago, Claire. I pitied you from the bottom of my heart. But you are hard as stone. If you had consented to do what I asked I would have been happy to settle half of my future income upon you, as I am taking up my violin again. But you are like a rock, as fixed in your mold as a fossil in its shelf of prehistoric stone."

She wrung her hands. "Oh, Alexis, don't speak to me of money! I'd rather kill myself than to take a penny from you under such conditions."

He eyed her wrathfully.

"But even that satisfaction is denied you by your church!"

"How you hate me!" She rose to her feet and faced him drearily.

His expression softened. "No, Claire. I never have hated you. You are mistaken. I even loved you once—as a sister."

"As a sister!" She flung her hands out before her blindly. "My God, what a fool, what an ignoble fool you must think me! And I did it all for the best. You were so ill, so distraught. So unlike yourself. The doctors advised me to do it. And you asked me, yourself. There was no other woman! I was so young, I loved you. I had always loved you, Alexis. The gift of myself seemed small in comparison with your need. I never thought it would bring unhappiness to you. Women seemed to mean so little in your life."

He stepped towards her uncertainly, a horrified question back of the anger in his eyes.

"But didn't you know, didn't you understand why I asked you?"

Cold perspiration broke over her quivering body. The claw-like dread clutched once more at her heart.

"What do you mean, Alexis?"

He laughed cruelly.

"The interesting little scene in my room, so beautifully stage-managed by my dear mother?"

She rose with a cry. "Alexis! You think I did—*that*?"

"Why not?" he shrugged. "The doctor said I needed a wife. That was a good way to provide me with one. When a child refuses to take medicine, it must be forced down his throat." He laughed excitedly.

"But Alexis, how? Why?"

She fell limply into a chair and he saw by her stricken face that she was innocent. He was seized by devastating remorse. He ceased his pacing abruptly.

"But Claire, this is terrible! I have been judging you all this time when you were innocent. I might have known better!"

Claire looked at him in amazement.

"So you think I arranged with your mother to have her find me in your room?" A slow anger flamed in her pale cheeks. "I may be a fool, but I'm not vile. I—I think I will go now." She drew herself out of the chair and started for the door. He followed her in a few swift strides.

"Claire, this is horrible. You must let me explain."

She avoided his touch with a visible shiver.

"It isn't necessary. I understand only too well. I think I knew it all from the first, only I refused to let myself. I suppose my aunt threatened to put me out of the house if you didn't marry me?"

"Yes," he hung his head. "But I really didn't mind, Claire. I didn't care what happened to me, and I'd always been fonder of you than any one else. Only it—it disgusted me to think you were not quite—straight."

She looked at him beneath heavy lids. Her bruised eyes hurt him.

"Why didn't you ask me, Alexis?" she said, simply.

"How could I? I was afraid you couldn't deny it." He stepped towards her. "Oh, Claire, please forgive me if you can!" He seized her hand, but she drew it away quickly.

"There's nothing to forgive, Alexis. It was quite natural that you should think as you did. And I—I was an infatuated fool. Oh, it is all a horrible muddle!" she wailed. (Tied to the body of a festering love was what he had said!) Hands to her lips to stifle a rising cry, she staggered towards the door.

With a remorseful gesture, he put her cape about her shoulders. His hands where they grazed her neck were icy. (The festering body of a dead love!) The old dizziness suddenly seized her.

"I must go!" she exclaimed wildly. She must not faint, she would not faint!

He took her outflung hands and pressed them repentantly.

"Is your taxi waiting for you?" His voice was husky.

"Yes, oh yes."

"Try to forgive me."

As she entered the elevator his voice echoed hollowly down the hall, "Good-by."

STRANGE AND SINISTER

Dr. Elliott walked over to the window and raised the sash. "There, that will do, Ito. Thank you. You may go now. Mrs. Petrovsky is coming to. If Mrs. Petrovsky, senior, should come in, please tell her I am here."

He took the hot water bottle from the little Jap and placed it at Claire's feet. "If I need anything more, I'll call you."

"Yes, sir." With a solicitous look towards the motionless figure on the bed, Ito trotted out of the room.

Claire stirred uneasily. A moan broke from the white lips. The great sunken eyes opened slowly and rested in wonder upon the face of Dr. Elliott.

"Did I faint?"

He nodded.

"You gave poor Ito quite a fright. Fortunately I was able to come at once. Don't worry, you'll be all right in a few minutes. Here, take this."

He held a spoon to her lips and she swallowed the cloudy liquid obediently.

"That's a good girl. Now don't talk. Just lie back quietly and see if you can sleep. I shan't leave you till you're able to fend for yourself." He sat down beside the bed and took her wrist in sturdy brown fingers.

"You're so good," she whispered tremulously. "And I'm such a nuisance."

"Didn't I say not to talk?" The tone was gruff, but his fingers tightened about the frail wrist.

"I'll—be good." The low voice broke. A moan issued from quivering lips. "Oh, oh, I cannot bear it! I cannot bear it," she sobbed. Her breast rose and fell in stormy gasps.

The young doctor leaned over her. "Don't, don't, you will hurt yourself! What is the matter? Tell me about it, perhaps I can help!"

"I cannot bear it!" The sobs rose wildly.

Brown face drained of color, he put his arms about the slight body and pillowed her head on his breast. "There, there, cry it out if you must. There's no one but me to hear you."

"Oh, oh, oh!" The slight body writhed in a renewed gust. "What shall I do? What will become of us all?"

"There, there." He stroked the convulsed forehead with cool fingers. "Things can't be as bad as all that. Tell me about it. That's what I'm here for, you know."

The cyclonic sobs increased. He cradled the small tortured body within his arms and rocked it to and fro like a baby.

"I wish I were dead. I ought never to have been born!"

The man was frightened. If this were to last much longer, there was no telling what would happen. When he spoke his voice was purposely abrupt.

"This must stop at once. Do you want to kill your child?"

"It would be better for him if he never were born." But his tone of command had calmed her. The sobs died down into a whimper.

He followed up his advantage sternly. "You must not say such things nor think them."

She stirred in his arms and he laid her back upon the pillow.

"But it is true. Nobody wants either of us. Nobody ever has wanted us."

"That is because you don't give them a chance. You are so shy. You always run away. Nobody could help loving you if they really knew you."

She hid her pallid young face. "Alexis doesn't. He wants me to get a divorce."

He reddened with anger. "That doesn't prove anything! These artistic people must be the devil to live with. Why don't you give him a divorce if he wants one? What is the use of staying together if you aren't happy?"

"I can't—you don't understand——" her voice came muffled from within the pillow.

He looked down upon the small dark head with compassion.

"Oh, yes, I understand all right. You think you love him and all that. Women like you always fall for the brutes. But it really isn't love, you know. An obvious case of masochism. My advice is to divorce and forget him. He isn't worth all these tears. There are plenty of men in the world who would be proud and happy in your love. I'm sorry this had to come up when you're not in the best condition for it. But now that it has, you might as well face the music."

Her great eyes chided him reproachfully. "He is not bad, poor Alexis. You misjudge him. It is not his fault that he doesn't love me."

He looked incredulous.

"Why did he marry you, then? Isn't he responsible for his actions?"

She shook her head. "He couldn't help himself. I was literally thrust down his throat!"

"You can't make me believe that he didn't know what he was doing! Of course he is obviously a neurotic. An arrant egotist. The sooner you're rid of him the better. He is taking advantage of your inexperience. And now you think you've got to pay for it the rest of your life. Why, you haven't lived one-third of it yet. Give him up. Let him go to the devil his own way. Don't allow him to drag you down with him. You are beautiful, appealing——"

"No, no!"

"I think so! Give some other chap the chance to make you happy."

The blanched lips twisted into a wry smile.

"You are only trying to be kind. I wish you wouldn't. I like you better when you're honest. Nobody has ever been in love with me in all my life. Nobody has even thought about me like that."

"I have," he replied simply.

Dumbfounded, she sat up in bed and leaned towards him uncomprehendingly. "You have?"

"Yes," he reiterated sturdily. "I have. Ever since our drive to Bronxville. And you've been happy with me, too. Didn't we have a good time when we bought the hat and the earrings? Haven't our little supper parties been fun?"

A wave of scarlet flooded her face and neck. "You don't know what you are saying. Yes, of course I've been happy with you. But that doesn't mean we love each other! Perhaps you pity me. But the other is—is absurd." Her shaky tones contained both a question and a longing.

"Why will you persist in depreciating yourself? Has nobody ever told you how sweet you are?" He bent over her and grasped the tiny hands in his. "Claire, I love you and I want you to divorce this man and marry me. I know I can make you happy. I will live only for that. I'll take you to Chicago and in new surroundings you will forget all that you have had to suffer. Listen, darling, won't you believe me?"

She drew her hands away with a little sob. "But you don't understand. You forget——"

"The baby, you mean? Why, no, I haven't forgotten him at all. I want him too. 'The more, the merrier!'" He laughed unsteadily.

Tears gushing from beneath the heavy lids, she looked up at him.

"Oh, you are a dear, and I cannot bear to hurt you. But it is all impossible. Even if I didn't love Alexis it would be impossible. I could never consent to a divorce. You see, I'm a Catholic!"

"A Catholic!" His startled gaze rested for a moment upon the ivory rosary at the head of the bed.

"Yes," she whispered, "now you understand, don't you? And you won't think I'm ungrateful? Say you understand?"

His set face retained its look of determination.

"I suppose so! But it seems too awful. Don't spoil both our lives."

Hands upon her ears, Claire looked at him beseechingly.

"Stop, you have said enough. If I had met you a year ago, perhaps things might have been different, although I doubt it, for I've loved Alexis ever since I was old enough to know what love meant. Now that he is my husband, I never could live with another man. It would be shameful. I never could hold my head up again. But please say you understand?"

Sudden pallor upon his square young face, he walked over to the open window.

"I believe I am beginning to," he said huskily. "I didn't realize that women like you still existed. I—I am defeated. If you wish, I will not come here again."

"Oh, oh," Claire gazed after him wanly. "I was afraid you would say that! Why, you're the only real friend I have. If you desert me, I don't know what I shall do. Won't you please forgive me?"

He hesitated a moment. His averted face worked oddly. Then he turned and walked back to the bed.

"What are you talking about?" The warm voice was a trifle unsteady. "Of course, I forgive you. We'll never mention the subject again. I want you to consult me just as if this had never happened. Promise?"

He held out his hand and she laid hers in it thankfully. Once more the tears were very close.

"Of course, I promise. What could I do without you?"

"That's right." He cleared his throat. "Now lie down again. I want you to stay in bed for a day or two, until your nerves get rested. I'll send you around a nurse. A nice, fat, little girl who will cheer you up. You need companionship. This colossal brute," he stooped quickly and picked up the diminutive Griffon from out his basket, "is not particularly diverting, except to look at." He met Claire's clouded eyes with a smile, and bag in hand, started for the door.

"So long, until to-morrow. Don't you dare be gloomy!"

As he reached the large square entrance hall, the front door opened and admitted Mme. Petrovsky. Swathed in sealskin, wreathed with smiles, a coquettish hippopotamus, she approached him.

"Oh, Dr. Elliott, you here? How charming! But perhaps I shouldn't be pleased? Is my dear daughter ill again? Or is this merely the sad return from one of your delightful little jaunts?"

He bowed awkwardly over the fat, white hand.

"Unfortunately, this visit is purely professional. Mrs. Petrovsky was taken ill quite unexpectedly, and Ito had the presence of mind to call me up."

She simpered.

"Dear Ito. He's quite invaluable, isn't he? Poor Claire, so she is ill again? Quite a tissue-paper little person, I'm afraid. What is the matter this time?"

"She must have been over-tired when she came in. She fainted and was unconscious for at least half an hour. I have told her to remain in bed for several days and I'm sending a nurse. Not that I think it's serious," he added hastily. Claire wouldn't want her mother-in-law to suspect anything. "But she needs a rest."

"Another fainting fit? Surely, there must be something seriously wrong? Are you keeping anything from me?"

"She is very anæmic and her heart isn't quite what it ought to be, perhaps."

"Isn't it? Dear me! So her heart is affected, you say? But surely you can cure it, can't you, Doctor?"

The large face simpered childishly. He glared at her with undisguised dislike.

"Please take me seriously, Mme. Petrovsky. There is nothing comical about the situation."

"Unless you except the secrecy," she rejoined with unexpected dryness.

He bristled perceptibly. "Secrecy?"

"I don't know what else to call it." The coquettish manner had disappeared. "It is quite obvious that my daughter-in-law is going to have a child, although of course she hardly shows it as yet. But what I cannot understand is why she has not told me about it. It seems very underhanded and strange, to say the least, decidedly unethical, not to say suspicious on your part."

"Unethical? Suspicious? What do you mean?" he cried, taken unawares, and conscious of rising fury.

The guileless China-blue eyes opened wide.

"Why, nothing, of course, against you! Only I thought that perhaps there might be some reason for

all this secrecy."

"What reason should there be?" he exclaimed irritably. "Mrs. Petrovsky, like many other young women in her situation, has had an urgent desire to keep her condition to herself as long as possible. I assure you it is quite an ordinary phase in pregnancy."

"Oh, is that so? How very quaint. I'm such a very simple person myself that it strikes me as very strange that a young woman should not want to tell her husband of an expected child, that is, of course, supposing it to be legitimate."

Dr. Elliott's lips grew white. What in hell was the old she-devil driving at?

"It might seem strange to a casual observer," he said, very much on his guard. "But to a doctor it is very ordinary. Quite a normal idiosyncrasy, I assure you."

Her manner changed, became charged once more with heavy coquetry.

"I'm so relieved to hear you say so. Of course I was not insinuating anything."—(So she had been, after all!)—"But it is so comforting to be reassured. I have so much confidence in you, Dr. Elliott. You cannot imagine what a pleasure it is to me to see the delightful friendship between you and my frail, little daughter-in-law, poor, dear child. Let me see, you have been friends for over a year, have you not?"

She encountered the murderous gleam in his eye with a bland smile.

"You are mistaken," he said curtly. "It is not quite four months since I attended Mrs. Petrovsky for the first time!"

"Oh, dear me! I had imagined you had met long before that. How could I have made such a mistake?"

"I'm sure I have no idea." A frown between his heavy brows, he regarded her gravely.

"Well, well, it has all been very sudden, hasn't it? You seem like an old friend to us all. Why, Claire positively raves over you."

"I cannot imagine Mrs. Petrovsky raving over anything or anybody, least of all a prosaic doctor like myself."

"Are you prosaic? Oh, I cannot believe that." She laid a heavy hand on his reluctant arm. "You haven't those romantic brown eyes for nothing. Oh, must you be going?"

He had edged gradually over to the door and stood with one hand placed upon the knob.

"I'm afraid I must."

"I am so sorry. I hope my idle chatter hasn't detained you from your duties?"

Her bland, pussy-cat smile pursued him to the hospital. It haunted the remainder of his day, and later invaded his sleep. He dreamed that Claire was a canary and Mme. Petrovsky, in the form of a Cheshire cat, had devoured her. The smile was outlined with blood.

CHAPTER XVIII

DISCORD

Above a livid line of snow the villa Sirena loomed brilliantly like some huge ocean liner, against the night.

A shiver of excitement ran up Anne's spine. So they had arrived at last! "How large it looks," she said rather breathlessly. In spite of herself a slight tremor crept into her voice. Alexis turned towards her passionately. Under cover of the darkness his face was puzzled, triumphant. This new, virginal Anne, was at once mysterious and adorable.

"It is rather deceptive at night," he replied quietly, ignoring her confusion. "Not really large at all, but I know it will please you because it's modeled exactly after the Florentine villas you love so much. Once inside, you scarcely dream you are only in Long Island."

With a skillful twist of the wrist, he turned the car in at the gates and entered the driveway.

"Of course I shall love it!"

He took a hand off the wheel and laid it on hers.

"Silly boy! Look out or you will run into the terrace."

They had stopped in front of the doorway. Bathed in the golden rays from the entrance-hall, they stared at each other in startled silence.

"Anne, Anne," Alexis' voice was broken. He started to put his arms about her. She pushed him away gently.

"Be careful, Alexis. The servants are at the door. And don't forget I am your cousin, Mme. Simone."

He got out of the car with a groan. "What a farce. I hate it, Anne."

"Not any more than I do!" she accepted his aid. Her eyes hovered over his miserable face comprehendingly, as she swept past him up the shallow steps.

"*Madame est la bienvenue!*"

A broad smile upon his ruddy face, Jules bowed low. He took Anne's suitcase from Alexis with an air of tragedy.

"Monsieur should 'ave call me! Shall I take the box of Madame to 'er room?"

"If you please, Jules." Alexis' eyes were fixed upon Anne's face. "Do you like it?"

She sat down upon a marble bench looking about her with genuine admiration. "It is beautiful, Alexis."

The small round hall was paved with large black and white marble slabs. In the center was a fountain over which presided the green bronze of a nude girl. Exquisitely slender, her arms were thrown above her head to support the masses of hair from whence water spouted. It trickled over face and breast, over delicate, rounded thighs, polishing them into black marble, but leaving the slender, curved back bare and lusterless. The gurgle and splash filled the room with liquid music, as thirst-assuaging as a mountain brook.

"What a lovely creature!" Anne encircled the fountain dreamily. "But doesn't her back ever get wet?"

"No, she is like an ostrich. What she doesn't see simply doesn't exist. I find her very irritating. I often splash her in revenge."

"How ungentlemanly!" Anne laughed. She moved away aimlessly.

He put his arm through hers almost timidly. "Would you like to see your room?"

"Why not?" Her voice was deliberately careless.

They mounted the curving, marble stairs, arm in arm.

"I hope you will like it. It is a bit rococo."

"Oh, I shan't mind. I know Karzimova's taste is supposed to be somewhat barbaric. It will be quite amusing to occupy her room. But weren't you in luck to get hold of her villa?"

"Yes, wasn't I?" he said simply. They had reached the large landing. Turning to the right, they entered a Gothic corridor. "Here you are." He stopped before an open door and stood aside for her to precede him. "Remember, I warned you," he finished apologetically.

The entire room was done in old gold and turquoise brocade. A narrow, Empire bed, with a canopy, stood lengthwise against the wall. Large, French windows outlined by turquoise hangings, and swathed in heavy lace, opened out on to an iron balcony. A few French prints perched naughtily upon the walls. On the Buhl dressing table was a large Tiffany bowl filled with gardenias. Their amorous scent rose upon the air triumphantly. Anne stooped over them, and inhaled the heady fragrance. It penetrated and warmed her brain like old wine.

"Well, what do you think of it?"

She started slightly at the sound of his voice directly behind her.

"A temple of love—but not at all respectable, my friend." Her laugh was both cynical and uncertain. She seated herself on the edge of the bed rather gingerly. The turquoise satin cover rustled voluptuously beneath her.

"I feel like Zola's Nana, or what's her name in Pierre Louys' 'Aphrodite'."

He laughed angrily. "I know it is in atrocious taste."

She held out her hand with a pretty, contrite gesture.

"Don't worry, dear. After all, we are ourselves, aren't we? Our surroundings can't change that. And I shall certainly be very comfortable." Once more her laugh rippled out uncontrollably. "Did you get the gardenias because the room shrieked for them, or because you really like them?" she demanded.

Crouched at her feet, he leaned his cheek against her outstretched hand.

"I love them," he confessed. "Is it low-brow of me? But their whiteness and fragrance remind me of you. And they are mysterious and exotic, which is another point of resemblance."

She laughed tenderly, her hand nestled against his blonde mane.

"Why will men always call me mysterious? Is it because, although I have red hair, my lashes and brows happen to be black instead of white like a guinea pig's?"

"Perhaps that is one reason. And then you are so very white and slim, a tower of ivory!" He turned his head lazily and brushed her palm with his lips. "But your flesh isn't cold like ivory, it is as white and warm as new milk. Anne, kiss me!"

He threw back his head, exposing the full young throat that always fascinated her. She bent low and their lips crushed against each other. A flush spreading beneath her smooth pallor, she raised her head and looked down at him.

"What time is it?" she inquired abruptly. "It must be quite late. I ought to be dressing for dinner, you know."

"Oh no, stay just as you are, dearest. You look beautiful. Besides, I can't bear to lose the time!"

"Crazy boy!" She removed him gently and rose to her feet. "What time do you dine?"

"Eight o'clock, I suppose." He looked abused.

"I must hurry then. It is long after seven. Come now, be good and run away." She patted his cheek. "Would you have me a Cinderella in such gorgeousness as this?" She waved a dramatic hand towards the hangings. Her lips curved mockingly.

"Very well," he shrugged. "Shall I send Elvira to help you? That is Jules' wife, and the only female in the house. She is probably dying of curiosity to see you."

"Well, I hate to commit murder, but as I haven't Regina with me, I'd rather get along by myself. I shall manage somehow."

He strolled regretfully towards the door.

"Well, if you need help, just stamp on the floor. My rooms are directly beneath these, in the bachelor suite. It would be so heavenly to have to hook you up, or something. As if we were really married?" His eyes were wistful.

"Dear boy!" She smiled at him between raised arms. She was removing her hat. Her long slim body, thrown slightly backwards, reminded him of the bronze in the fountain below. "I am wearing a tea-gown and there will be no hooks."

"There ain't goin' to be no core." His little, rueful laugh rang down the hall behind him.

A little later, in the bath-room, she gazed about her in amusement and despair. Oh, for the cool, white tiles of her own chaste, little sanctuary! This one was Moorish in style, with a shallow bench running all around the sunken bath of turquoise tiles. A huge dolphin's head served as a faucet. As she turned the tap it spouted a crystal stream. She slid down into the water with a laugh. The glistening of goldfish outlined in mosaic upon the bottom of the tub had caught her eye. But her body, luminous in the bluish tint cast by the tiles, elongated beneath the rippled surface of the water, gave her a sensuous pleasure. Pink-tipped, the ivory hillocks of her breast thrust upwards. Slim flanks melted into shadow. She sighed luxuriantly.

Dinner was served in the large, lunetted dining room. The refectory table was drawn up against the frescoed wall, and Anne and Alexis sat side by side upon a long bench. In a clinging, sleeveless gown of white velvet, a small knot of gardenias pinned against the red-gold of her hair, Anne's beauty made Alexis' brain reel. He longed for the meal to be over, so that he might have her all to himself. The gallant subservience of old Jules irritated him almost to a frenzy. This woman was his. The firm column of her throat, the gleaming pilasters of her arms. She was a temple, he the high priest. His alone the inner shrine.

After an interminable agony, Jules brought coffee and left them.

Anne was laughing softly.

"I was remembering the bathroom," she said, in answer to his look of inquiry. "It demoralized me completely. Even to the stealing of some of Karzimova's bath salts. I usually hate a perfumed bath, but the *mise en scène* fairly shrieked for it. I hope I don't smell too strong?"

He leaned so close that his flaring nostrils grazed her hair.

"It is hard to tell where the gardenias begin and you end," he laughed excitedly.

She encountered his flaming eyes with a little thrill of fear.

"I felt more than ever like the heroine of 'Aphrodite,'" she continued moving away rather nervously. "Do you remember the famous bath?"

His tension relaxed.

"I hope the resemblance was not too accurate?" He laughed daringly. She blushed, and bending forward, chose a peach from the amber bowl in front of them.

"What gorgeous fruit for December! You're an extravagant creature!"

He helped himself to a sprawling bunch of black grapes.

"Why shouldn't I be? I sold a bond the other day, and in six weeks I give my first recital. After that, as you know, my time is completely booked. Rosenfield is a slave-driver."

"But he is a good manager. He's so enthusiastic about you."

He shrugged indifferently. "I suppose so."

"And do you really find it easier to practice here than in New York?"

"Oh, yes. It is so divinely quiet. And then the air is so good. I walk two hours a day, as the doctor told me to do. It would have been an awful bore to have had to go South. You couldn't have come with me and I should have gone mad. As it is—I am in heaven!"

Anne paled. His fervor always frightened her. How could such happiness last?

"But I can only come occasionally, you know, dear. It is difficult for me to get away. I have to make excuses," she faltered. "Excuses, even to Regina. I feel sure she suspects something. Subterfuge is horrible. I loathe it."

Head drooping upon its slender stem, she looked like a chidden child. A spasm of fear swept over his face. Anne was suffering. Was it all too much for her? God, if he were only free to marry! Hatred for Claire gripped his vitals like a vise. He rose and stood over her trembling.

"Anne, you will not give me up? It would kill me!"

The stiletto anguish of his cry tore her soul.

"No, no, my poor Alexis." She stood up and laid her hands on his shaking shoulders. "Come, you are over-excited. Let's go into the other room. I want you to play for me. But only a little, for I know you are tired."

"Yes, of course, I will play to you, but first I have something to show you."

His young voice was excited. He slipped his hand into the warm crook of her elbow and led her into the salon. The many vases and jars were filled with dark red, almost black, roses, Anne's favorite flowers. She smiled. The boy had forgotten nothing. Sinking into a small sofa before the large, hooded fireplace, she looked up at him.

"This reminds me of my villa in Florence. Only more gorgeous, of course. I love the carved ceiling and the stone floors. The tapestries look quite genuine, too."

"I believe they are supposed to be." His tone was absent. He took a small package from the table and brought it to her almost shyly.

"Is this for me?" She glanced up in surprise. He nodded.

"Open it." The intense face bent over her eagerly, while she removed the paper wrapping.

"How exquisite!"

It was a small wooden coffer such as Florentine women had used to contain jewelry. The lid was rounded and on it was painted a replica in miniature of Botticelli's Venus rising from the sea. The lovely faded colors were like a greeting.

"I never saw anything so lovely! Where did you get it?"

"I've had it for years. But I thought you'd like it. But aren't you going to open it?"

"Is there anything in it?"

"Look and see."

A green velvet jewel-case lay ensconced within the polished interior.

"Oh!" Anne's heart sank. She opened the case with a feeling of cold apprehension.

Livid flashes of emeralds. White fire of diamonds. Anne turned away dazzled eyes.

"Alexis, how could you?"

He lifted the bracelet and held it out to her coaxingly.

"Do you like it, dear?" His voice was infinitely tender. "Let me put it on for you."

"It is beautiful, but I cannot take it, Alexis. Please put it away."

"You cannot take it? Why not?" His voice was desperate.

"I cannot accept such a valuable gift, dear."

"Not from me?"

"Especially not from you."

"Oh my God, are you going to be conventional, Anne?"

"You should not be the one to accuse me of that, Alexis!" She had risen and they were staring at each other angrily.

"If you loved me, you'd take it!"

"You don't understand," she said more gently. "I should feel as if I had lost caste. And besides, you ought not to afford it. Dearest, can't you see I don't want to be an expense, or drag on you in any way?"

"Expense! Drag! If you were my wife you'd take it, wouldn't you?"

"That is a different story."

"Well, it's not my fault you are not, is it? I wish to heaven you were. Then I could be sure of you. This incompleteness is killing me." He flung himself face downwards upon the sofa.

"Alexis, be reasonable!"

"I wish I were dead! You have never loved me. All you have ever given me was in pity. If you cared for me, you'd take my gift and wear it."

An expression of abnegation upon her face, she stooped and picked up the bracelet from where he had flung it on the rug between them. "Alexis, look. See? It is on!"

"Anne, you darling!"

He sprang to his feet, and catching her in his arms, carried her to the sofa.

"Be careful. You will hurt yourself," she cried breathlessly. "Remember, I am as tall as you are."

His arms about her, he laughed crazily.

"Ah, but you are light, light as a moonbeam, and as luminous. Light as my heart!"

With a gesture, maternal in its compassion, she wound her arms about his neck, and drawing his face down to hers, offered him her mouth. Teeth pressed against the fruit-like flesh, he ran his lips along her chin and bare shoulder.

"Anne, I am hungry and thirsty for you!"

With a sigh of relinquishment, she relaxed in his arms.

A bell pealed derisively through the house.

Alexis sprang to his feet with an impatient exclamation. Anne sat up hastily and smoothed her hair with nervous fingers.

"What is it?"

"The door bell." He was pale from the sudden recoil.

"But does any one know you are here? Who can it be at this hour?"

"God knows." Their eyes met in sudden confusion, a sweet secret shame, then scattered self-consciously.

Came a discreet knock on the door, and Jules entered.

"Excuse it, *Monsieur*, but zere is a lady who desires to speak to *Monsieur*." His air of apology was comical.

"Did she say who she was?" Alexis' voice was elaborately careless.

"Yes, *Monsieur*. She say she good friend of *Monsieur*. 'Er name ees Miss Ellen Barnes. Er automobile is—vot you call it—stalled in ze snow."

Alexis nodded briefly. "Very well, Jules. Tell her I will be right down. You may go."

The little man trotted out hastily.

"Ellen!" Alexis' expression was murderous. "She has been on our trail ever since you had her to tea with us before I left New York!"

Anne's hand went to her mouth. "She must not see me!"

Her distress put him on his metal. He laid his arm about her shoulders.

"Don't be frightened, dear. She won't discover a thing. Run to your rooms. I will go down and see the comedy through."

"Yes, yes, I know I can rely upon you."

He opened the door and she slipped out upon the landing and up the stairs. As she disappeared around the bend, Alexis started downwards.

Accompanied by Gerald Boynton and two strangers, Ellen was waiting in the octagonal hall. They were giggling so hard at the fountain that Alexis had to cough twice before they became aware of his presence. Upon catching sight of him Ellen swept forward gayly.

"We were admiring your companion," she drawled with a little dry laugh.

"She is hardly entertaining," replied Alexis. "But I hear you are in trouble. What can I do to help?"

"Oh, nothing, thank you. I guess the chauffeur can manage by himself. Our wheel came off just as we were passing your driveway. Wasn't it too providential? It might have happened out in the open country."

"Very providential." Alexis's brows were quizzical. "Won't you come upstairs while you are waiting? I'll send my chauffeur out to help your man." He nodded to Jules.

"We'd love to. But I forgot to introduce my friends. What must you think of me?" She was already half way up the flight of stairs. "This beautiful little person is Miss Olive Fay of the 'Cloggers.'" She pushed forward a fluffy little blonde with large, ingenuous eyes. "You have heard of her, I am sure. Her fame has gone abroad."

"I have seen your photograph in the Sunday papers. Miss Fay." Alexis bowed formally over the tiny paw.

"I am much nicer, aren't I?" She pouted pretty painted lips, and looked up at him beneath darkened lashes.

"Much!" His ironic inflection piqued her.

"And this is Señor Caldenas. He paints portraits of society ladies. He is rapidly acquiring a fortune because he insists upon their posing in mediæval costumes and compares their souls to the Mona Lisa."

"That is because I believe in reincarnation," the little man smiled affably up at Alexis, who warmed up to him most unexpectedly.

"And this is Mr. Boynton. He was at Anne's for tea. Do you remember?" Ellen's eyes were amused.

"Of course, how could I forget an occasion like that?" Alexis' voice was cool.

They had reached the landing and he stood aside as they entered the large salon.

"Why, it is the old world!" exclaimed the Spaniard, advancing into the room with small prancing steps. "Quite *vieux monde*. I congratulate you. Absolutely authentic, although a little new and smelling of varnish, if one may say it?"

Ellen sank into a highbacked chair, laughing.

"Even Florentine villas were young once! Pedro would like to have everything covered with dry rot. He doesn't enjoy sitting in a chair unless it is ready to break under him. He won't even come to see me any more, because he says my house upsets his functional system."

"It's true. It does." Caldenas nodded like a serious baby.

"I notice he doesn't object to musical comedy, and that's pretty up to date," giggled the fluffy one.

The Spaniard shrugged up to his ears.

"But, my dear lady, musical comedy is as old as woman's oldest profession!"

"Lewd creature!"

"Apropos of that, as Lord Dundreary would remark, have you seen Anne lately, Petrovsky?" Gerald's drawl drove the blood into Alexis' face.

He saw Ellen's eyes encounter Gerald's with a significant smile.

"I have not seen Mrs. Schuyler," Alexis emphasized the prefix, "for at least a week. You see, my doctor recommended country air and quiet. So I'm following his orders. And incidentally, preparing for my recital in January." He strolled over to Ellen and seated himself on a carved stool at her side.

"But how did you happen to be out in these wilds, in this wintry weather?" His eyes probed her ironically.

Her poise remained unshaken.

"Well, you see, we were all dining with some friends in Glen Cove. Fortunately, it was Sunday night and Olive and I were free. We passed right by here on the way. You know the rest." She smiled challengingly into his angry eyes.

"You must be tired," he said, forcing himself to be courteous. He rose and pulled the crimson bell-rope. "What will you have? Cocktails or whisky and soda?"

"Whisky and soda. That'll suit us all right, won't it, children?"

They all agreed except Caldenas, who demanded *cognac*.

"That is, if you have it, in this thirst-beridden country?"

"I'll bet he has with the rum runners not two miles from his windows!" said Gerald.

"I think there is a bottle or two," Alexis smiled almost genially. The Spaniard, under other circumstances, would have been quite enduring. There was something naively wise about him that appealed to one.

Jules entered and took Alexis' order.

A cigarette between her lips, Ellen strolled about the large room. She leaned across a table and sniffed at the red roses.

"You do yourself well, Mr. Petrovsky, 'roses in December!' Isn't that the title of a song? Sent by some admirer, I suppose?"

"Or did we come in upon a party?" Olive's ingenuous eyes were fixed upon Alexis.

"What is this?" exclaimed Ellen before he could reply. She held up the empty jewel case. "Have you been giving yourself presents?"

Alexis' hands clenched. His nails bit into the palms savagely.

"Not guilty, Miss Barnes. That box must have been left by the former owner. Let me see it." He took the box from Ellen's fingers and pocketed it quietly.

The fluffy one danced up to Alexis.

"I don't believe him. It's a present from some woman. Show me your wrist, Mr. Petrovsky. I want to see your mascot."

He raised his hands and shook them above his head. "Now will you believe me!"

"Be careful. Jewelry isn't safe when Olive is around," warned Ellen.

"Oh, what wonderful hands you have, Mr. Petrovsky. Are they insured?"

Alexis laughed. "Yes, but my temper isn't, Miss Fay."

"Ooh! Snubbed!" She pretended to cry.

Jules came in with the drinks and passed them around. The ice in the tall glasses clinked invitingly.

"To our host," said the Spaniard, returning from a tour about the room. He held up his *cognac* and bowed ceremoniously.

"And his invisible guest," muttered Gerald, gulping down his whisky.

Alexis did not drink. Anne loathed a whisky-laden breath. He sat down at the piano and allowed his fingers to wander over the keys.

"Oh, do play, Mr. Petrovsky. I'm just crazy to hear you!" The fluffy one pirouetted up to the piano.

Jules reentered the room, accompanied by Ellen's chauffeur. She beckoned him across the room.

"What's the matter, George? Can't you fix the car?"

"No ma'am, I can't. The key to the wheel is lost, and there ain't a garage open anywheres. I've been all over the country with Mr. what's his name's chauffeur."

Ellen's eyes were glued expectantly upon Alexis. "What shall we do?" she wailed.

He looked at her and then at the others, with an amused expression. Their air of open-mouthed expectancy was ludicrous, and reminded him of a lot of goldfish waiting to be fed.

"I'm afraid you will have to resign yourselves to spending the night," he said suavely. "I can easily put you up." (Far more easily than I can put up with you).

"How delightful of you. It will be quite an adventure." Ellen rolled her eyes.

"I'm simply crazy about the idea. You know, I've fallen dreadfully in love with you, Mr. Petrovsky." Olive laid her hand upon the keyboard, ingratiatingly. He shook it off lightly and rose from the piano.

"I'm sure you're all worn out," he said, longing to be rid of the pack of them. "I'll go and see about your rooms at once."

"Quite the *châtelain*," drawled Gerald, throwing himself down beside Ellen. He lowered his voice suddenly. "Well, you lost! She is not here!" A sluggish gleam of triumph flickered in his eyes.

Ellen laughed.

"Don't you fool yourself. Everything points to it. From the condition of Petrovsky's hair when we arrived, to the jewel case. Besides, I smell her perfume." She sniffed audibly. "It's the mixture Bazani put up for her, himself. Very faint, but gets there, my boy."

He laughed disagreeably. "So do you, Ellen. You make me feel like Dr. Watson. You win the gold needled hypodermic."

"What are you sniffing about? Have you, too, caught cold?" Olive sat down on the sofa opposite. "Isn't it too exciting to be laid up here all night? I just adore Petrovsky! He is so cold and wonderful-looking, so *distingay!*"

"Almost as 'aughty as an English butler," snarled Gerald, his eyes upon the other end of the room, where Caldenas was examining a portrait with the aid of a small magnifying glass.

Alexis returned.

"Your rooms are ready." His eyes darted from one face to the other. "Would you like to go to bed?"

Ellen rose with a yawn, her hand clapped against her mouth rhythmically. "Do show us the house first."

"Yes, please." Olive's fingers closed upon his arm. "Lead me to it," she screamed.

He took them into the dining room. Caldenas was in an ecstasy, but Ellen interrupted impatiently. She pushed by the others, passed through the salon again and out into the hall.

"It's the bedrooms I want to see." She hurried up the stairs, with a malicious look at Alexis.

Olive, clinging to his arm like a sack of potatoes, he followed as swiftly as possible, Gerald and the puzzled Spaniard brought up the rear.

Ellen turned into the corridor and stopped before Anne's door. She tried the knob.

"It's locked!" she exclaimed, challenging Alexis with her eyes. "I'm sure this must have been Karzimova's room. Do let us in. I'm crazy to see it."

Very pale, Alexis disengaged himself from Olive and stepped forward quickly.

"I haven't the key." He leaned against the wall to conceal trembling knees. "Karzimova stipulated it should not be used in her absence."

"Bluebeard, give us the key! Whom are you concealing in there?"

"I think you're mean," broke in Olive. "I want to go in, too. They say she is so wicked, you know. Full of secret vices." She opened empty eyes at the group to inquire plaintively, "What are secret vices?"

"There is nothing concealed that shall not be revealed," quoted Gerald sanctimoniously.

"You Americans!" laughed Caldenas. "How you love the stolen jam! Is it not so, poor children?"

Under cover of the laughter, Gerald drew nearer to Ellen. "Come on, let's go," he whispered. "You can't expect a fellow to unlock his own doors if he doesn't want to. Besides, we've seen enough!"

"Very well," Ellen raised her voice. "You're a tightwad, Mr. Petrovsky, but we give in. You may spank us and put us to bed, like the old woman in the shoe if you want to."

They trooped back noisily down the hall.

Elvira appeared at the other end of the corridor. Her plump figure looked beautiful to Alexis. "The rooms are ready, *Monsieur*."

He sighed with relief. Leading them down another hallway, he entered a distant wing.

"Here you are. Good-night, I hope you'll be comfortable!" He struggled to conceal his delight.

They parted from him with effusion.

Much later, a solitary figure in a wine-colored dressing gown crept up the stairs and stopped in front of Anne's door. It scratched at the panel delicately, but received no response.

Wintry dawn, gray, disconsolate, filtered in at Alexis' window. The dressing gown still about him, he lay face downward upon his solitary bed.

CHAPTER XIX

A CRESCENDO

Anne stirred uneasily. One slim, bare arm emerged from beneath the satin coverlet and wavered towards her face. The depths of her exhausted sleep, suddenly violated, rippled and broke. Returning consciousness beat against her like a gusty wave. She sat up in bed and looked towards the open window in puzzled astonishment. To her amazement, it was already daylight, and the raucous cry of a motor siren was shrilling stridently.

With a sickening thud, recollection fell upon her. She sprang out of bed and ran towards the open window. Hiding behind the heavy curtains, she gazed down onto the snow-covered driveway below. As she had expected, there was Ellen's car, and in a little group on the terrace above it, was Ellen, herself, surrounded by the others. They were bidding an effusive farewell to Alexis, who, with his back turned toward the house, stood hatless and coatless at the top of the steps.

He will catch cold again, thought Anne, as with chattering teeth she wound the heavy curtain about her. Oh, why don't they hurry? Her eyes fell upon the thick-set figure of the Spaniard. Caldenas! She shook with inward amusement. What is he doing in this *galère*?

Hat jammed over his face, Gerald Boynton leaned close to Ellen's massive shoulders, whispering in her ear. They turned, and raking the far side of the house, eyed Anne's balconied window. Beneath the vulture-like stare, Anne shivered and concealed herself more closely within the enfolding curtain.

Olive Fay, small, fur-clad, clung limply to Alexis' arm.

"Bye-bye, Mr. Petrovskoy, I'm just furious we've got to beat it so early. Bother these rehearsals, anyway!" Her tone shrilled up to Anne on the icy air. "You won't forget that box you promised me for your concert, will you? I'm not strong for the high-brow stuff, but I've certainly fallen for you, and it'll give the dear public a shock to see me in Carnegie Hall." She sprang nimbly down the steps and hopped into the motor. Flesh-colored stockings gleamed upon rounded calves.

"Yes, we shall all be there, *en masse*," drawled Ellen, one foot upon the running-board. "You may count upon us!" Her voice raised maliciously, she fastened her eyes upon Anne's windows.

As the car swung around the driveway, Caldenas, a cherubic smile upon his round face, leaned out recklessly. His eyes were fixed ecstatically upon the house. "It is a gem," he was shouting lustily. "*Un pocito palacio*."

An odd smile upon her face, Anne closed the window softly. She envied the little Spaniard his absent-minded imperviousness. What a boon! Would the gods had seen fit to grant it to her also! With a shrug she went into the bathroom and turned on the faucet behind the dolphin's head. Like a shower of gleaming crystal the water spouted on to the tiles. Chilled to the marrow, a hot bath would send the generous blood once more flowing in her congealed veins. The steam encircled her, with its warm, comforting breath. Her sheer nightgown fell around her feet like a discarded sheath. She sank slowly into the frothing stream. It lapped against her chin like the warm tongue of an affectionate dog. As she went through the mechanical ritual, her thoughts perused the events of the past night. It was sheer madness for Alexis to have come to her door. Disregarding entirely the danger from eavesdroppers, the action had been in atrocious taste. Had he expected her to receive him as if nothing had happened? The very idea was a degradation. It made her feel soiled, ill at ease, galled with the entire situation. He had shown no sense of delicacy whatsoever. And yet—was she perhaps being a little hard on him? After all, he was very young and very much in love? But he ought to have known better, and she would have to teach him. She stepped out of the bath and started to rub herself briskly. The exhilarating glow of her blood coursed through her comfortingly. Nevertheless, she decided to go home that very morning, instead of waiting until the following day as she had planned. After all, she was no longer in the mood to stay. Her nerves were irritable, frayed. The fine ecstasy of sacrifice entirely gone.

She thrust her head deftly through the elliptical opening of a *négligée*. It fell in caressing folds to her feet. An underglow of turquoise chiffon showed against the sheer black, through which her skin gleamed like alabaster. With a feminine glance into the mirror, she reentered the bedroom and ordered her breakfast over the house wire. "Yes, please, coffee, fruit and toast." Her tones were briskly business-like.

Then she slipped back into bed.

A few minutes later a clatter of dishes approached down the hall, followed by a knock.

"Come in," called Anne languidly.

The door broke open unceremoniously and Alexis burst in with the breakfast tray.

"Alexis!" Completely off her guard, Anne blushed crimson.

He pranced over to the table and deposited the tray upon it. "*Enfin seuls!*" His face was radiant. "Thank God, they had rehearsals and had to rush off early."

"Yes, I know," said Anne. "I watched them leave from the window."

He laughed excitedly. "Wouldn't they have been furious if they had guessed?"

"But they did! I saw them looking up to my opened windows and whispering."

He sat down upon the bed and falling upon her hands covered them with kisses. "What do we care?"

Her laugh was angry. She happened to care a great deal.

"Insane boy, what possessed you to bring up my breakfast? What will Jules think?"

"That you have a devoted cousin!" His joyous laugh rang out again. He cupped her face in his long fingers and leaned over her hotly. "What do we care what he thinks? He is a good old soul, and well paid to keep his mouth shut. Besides, after your sudden disappearance of last night, he probably suspects the beautiful worst."

Anne's face clouded. She drew away from the caressing fingers.

"Yes, probably, unless he's a complete fool," she commented dryly. The tide of irritation flowed over

her.

Alexis sensed her frigid mood. His face became suddenly miserable. He went over to the table, picked up the tray and laid it across her knees.

"Here, dearest. Drink your coffee before it gets cold. Shall I pour it for you?"

"No, thank you." She tipped the pot and the brown liquid issued into the cup in a tubular stream. Its fragrance permeated the room. "Alexis?"

"Yes, darling?" There was apprehension in his voice.

She sipped her coffee slowly. "I've decided to go back to New York this morning."

A dark flush tinted his pale cheeks. "So you are angry!"

He walked over to the window and looked out upon the whitened lawns. Her eyes followed him coldly.

"Oh, no, I'm not angry, only shall we say, a little out of mood?"

He turned and faced her. He looked pitiful, an animal at bay.

"But Anne, is that reasonable? Is that fair? Was it my fault last night? The intrusion was abominable and probably premeditated. I loathed it as much as you. I did my best to shield you, and, after all, they went away without discovering anything, didn't they?"

Her lips curled mockingly.

"They may not have actually caught a glimpse of me in the flesh, but their suspicions were practically confirmed." She bit savagely into a piece of toast.

"So you are going to make me suffer?" He strode back from the window and threw himself into a chair beside the bed.

"Not at all. Only, as I said before, I'm no longer in the mood to stay. Surely, I have the privilege of changing my mind?" Putting aside the tray, she thrust her bare arms behind her gleaming head. Her beauty was insolent. A flame of desire, of hatred, and of anguish, scorched him. He leaned forward and put his head in his hands.

"You are cruel. I could almost hate you! Why do you want to torture me? Wasn't last night enough?"

"Last night?"

He raised his head and looked into her eyes. "Yes, last night. When you refused to let me in I returned to my room and threw myself upon the bed and lay there all night. I went through hell. Unsatisfied, burning for you in every fiber of my body. All the old madness, the dread, the fear, came back upon me like a nightmare, and for a week, ever since I saw you last, I had dreamed of something so different."

A gleam of pity crept into Anne's eyes. She averted them quickly.

"You certainly did not expect me to receive you here with those people in the house?" she said less coldly. "I could not understand your coming to me that way. It offended me, Alexis."

"If you really loved me, you never would have thought of that. You would have forgotten those others as quickly as I did. The moment I left them in their rooms I thought only of you, my Anne, my beautiful one. But even then I waited for what seemed like an eternity." He flung himself upon his knees and buried his face in the coverlet.

"Oh, Anne, it never occurred to me that you would feel that way. You had already given yourself to me, dearest, and we had both so looked forward to being together in this house. Our love was so hemmed in, so incomplete in New York. This was to be our refuge, where we could enjoy a security almost as wonderful as if we were married."

A smile twisted Anne's lips into a downward curve. "It was very secure, wasn't it?"

"Don't be cruel. Last night was only an incident. It won't occur again. Not a soul except Rosenfield knows where I am. He even forwards my mail."

"I wonder how Ellen discovered us, then? Is Rosenfield bribeable?"

"Of course not! Perhaps Karzimova's press agent gave it away. Any way, let's forget it. I'm sure they would never dare to come out again. You're too valuable a friend for Ellen to risk when her blood is cooled off!"

His sudden astuteness amused her.

"Perhaps you are right."

He pursued his advantage hastily. "We could be so happy, if you would only let us. If you don't love me I simply don't want to go on living. I was literally in hell when you discovered me, I am your creature. Even my music came back only because of you. And now you want to destroy me!"

The little, wry smile once more curved her lips. She laid her hand upon the rumped head lying so close to her breast. "You demand a great deal, my Alexis," she murmured.

He raised his head and met her quizzical eyes proudly. "I demand only what I supposed you were willing to give! If you don't want to stay I shall not keep you against your will. I suppose I can go back to the devil again after all. I ought to know the way!" he finished with boyish fury and despair.

Anne capitulated, with amusement and despair. Taking his hand in hers, she pressed it softly. Her eyes were maternal.

"What a baby you are, Alexis."

"You are going to stay!" He sat down upon the bed and fell upon her with ravenous kisses. His arms closed about her.

"Yes, I am going to stay," she gasped, breathless from the onslaught. She suddenly felt old and worn. Tired to the core. Would he always wear down her resistance like this? She pushed him away almost feebly.

"And now, will you let me get up, please? It is too beautiful a day to remain in bed."

"I don't want to go out. I want to stay here," he whispered, his rebellious lips upon her neck.

A little tremor thrilled through her tired body. "No, Alexis, you don't understand. Not in this room. Not here," she pleaded against his ear. "I—I can't bear this room."

Taken by surprise, he released her and regarded her in dejected astonishment.

"Why, Anne, do you dislike it as much as all that? Does it really make you unhappy?"

She nodded.

"Why, darling, if I had only known that, I should never have put you here. Of course, it's a bit rococo, I admit, but on the other hand, I didn't feel any of the others were good enough for you."

"Oh, yes, they are." She nodded with renewed vigor. "If you want me to forget last night, give me another room, Alexis. Something wholesome and simple. Free of associations with Karzimova. Is there anything in the house like that?"

He looked at her with reverence. Beneath each new leaf that this woman unfolded her heart showed more undefiled. Bursting with tenderness, he touched his lips to her hand like a worshipper.

"Of course there is a room like that, dearest and best. A room that will just suit you. Its walls are painted a soft yellow. The chintzes are gay, and the sun pours in at the windows all day long. With it goes a white tiled bathroom of impeccable respectability."

They laughed gayly. She sat up and clapped her hands.

"Just what I want. The chaste, white tiles of the great American middle classes are good enough for me. I will get up immediately and dress, and then you can help me move my things."

He looked at her with passionate protest. "Must you dress?"

"Of course!" She slipped a slim white leg out of the bed and pulled the sheer black negligee down over it quickly.

With the swiftness of a hawk, he swooped down upon her foot and kissed it. His lips brushed across the curving instep, the adorable little hollow of the arch. Then he placed it upon his head with a flourish. "A slave passes beneath the triumphal arch, oh Queen!"

"Stop it this minute! You are tickling me, monster!"

She drew her foot put of the curly hair with a slight shiver, only to have him snatch it once more to his lips.

"What makes your heel so pink? Do you rouge it?" He looked up at her with an impertinent grin.

A twinkle in her eye, she shook her head vigorously. "Of course not."

"Is it just natural for it to be so wonderful? And the little toes so pink and cunning, too?" Her polished toe-nails gleamed rosily up at him. He put on her black satin mule lingeringly. "Now give me the other foot."

She held it out with a low laugh. "Same ceremony, lest it should feel slighted!"

"Now you must go this minute," she stood up and gave him a little push.

He adopted an injured air. "I'm going to stay and help you dress."

"No you're not, my friend." Her smile was determined. "Out you go this moment." Slipping her arm in his, she led him to the door. His cheeks flushed hotly, he made a desperate attempt to embrace her, but she eluded him nimbly.

"No, no, bad one! I don't intend to spend an exotic, temperamental morning. I want to go out and take a walk or something. The snow and the sunshine make me think of the Engadine."

He sighed loudly, and then brightened. After all, Anne was here, and she had promised to stay until to-morrow, at least. It was hardly decent to hurry her.

"Very well, we'll do anything you wish. How would you like to toboggan? There's a splendid hill right here in the grounds and I came upon an old sled in the basement the other day."

"Oh, I should love that!" She clasped her hands with genuine enthusiasm.

He smiled delightedly. "And then there is an old inn, I believe it was a mill once, where we might lunch or tea. It is very out of the way and quite safe."

"That sounds very gay. Hurry up and go, dear. I just can't wait to toboggan. Do you suppose we'll kill ourselves?" She pushed him out into the hall and continued laughingly: "I'll leave my door open while I dress and you can play to me, will you? You know you won't have another chance to practice to-day."

"Slave driver! Female Svengali!" he chuckled happily. "Trilby hastens to obey."

A few moments later the exquisite wail of the violin drifted up the stairs. A contented smile upon her lips, Anne slipped hastily into her lingerie. The joy of the creator pulsed within her.

The day proved a huge success. Smooth as an uncrumpled rose-leaf, it unfolded itself for the lovers without a hint of the hectic jealousy, the frenzied bickering that Anne had learned to dread. The hills were steep and possessed of a real thrill. Their happy shrieks rang out as they tumbled over each other on to the crisp, blue-shadowed snow.

Followed a quiet lunch at home, ensparked by a bubbling old red wine, which Anne had brought on purpose from her own cellar. Then a drive over glistening roads under the snow-hung trees, after which they partook of tea at the quaint, deserted old inn, where Anne extravagantly purchased the entire stock of Spanish pottery and other useless, but amusing trifles.

After dinner, Alexis played and Anne accompanied him at the piano. The music rose, a frenzied crescendo. It strung their quivering senses higher and ever higher to a bliss almost unbearable, a culmination of rapture that was pain. Their souls blent in a single ecstasy. As the last quivering notes died into silence, Anne rose from the piano.

"That is enough," she whispered hoarsely. "I cannot bear any more."

Alexis laid his violin in the case with his usual mechanical care. He approached Anne slowly. Their glances mingled like two fires. Extending their arms in a single gesture, they melted against each other in a violent embrace.

In her new chaste, little room, Anne undressed with trembling fingers. The virginal panic which renewed itself at each contact with Alexis seized upon her like a species of stage-fright.

But when he came, it vanished beneath the fervor of his kisses.

They shared a communion so perfect, an ecstasy so deep that it resembled death. When they recovered from the swoon, Alexis laid his head upon Anne's shoulder like a weary child.

"I want to sleep with my head upon your breast. I want to lie beside you all night, just as if we were married, just as if I had the right," he sobbed.

Anne soothed him, as a woman soothes the child at her breast, and presently he slept. But she lay awake beside him for a long time, staring out into the moonlit night, savoring her love, her compassion, her sacrifice.

OFFERINGS TO THE GOD OF GENIUS

The holiday season parted the lovers temporarily. Alexis' Christmas gift, a carved emerald, about her neck, like a symbol of slavery, Anne went to Virginia to visit her aunt. She was gone two weeks and the change did her good. An invalid, her aunt saw almost no one, and the blessed sunny monotony of the days fell like balm upon Anne's irked spirit. Wrapped in rugs, for the air was keen, she sat with the old lady in the frost-touched garden and read aloud to her from gentle, time-worn books, which they both loved. Stevenson and Thackeray, and once or twice Jane Austen. Or, if they felt particularly devilish, Bourget, or even Prévost. Well-bred salacities, as mild and unleshly as a Watteau screen. Meanwhile, Anne's soul basked in the radiant peace.

The winter had not proved an easy one, so far, and as the time approached for Alexis' concert, Anne welcomed his increased absorption. His accompanist, Paul Leon, spent the greater part of the week at the house in Long Island, leaving Saturdays and Sundays as the only free days, and the greater part of these were spent either in practicing, or in talking over with Anne the programs for his coming season. Following his recital in Carnegie Hall, at the end of January, there were to be several appearances with different orchestras, including the Philharmonic. After that the projected tour of the principal cities would come. All this required a very careful and varied choice of program. And Alexis was both painstaking and meticulous. As he was temperamental as well, it naturally followed that he often changed his mind. One day, a Tchaikowsky Concerto would obsess him to the point of rapture. The next he would develop a Beethoven complex. Some waltz of Wienawski, a serenade of Kreisler would fling him into Paradise for a week. The Serenade Melancolique rode him for days like a subconscious sorrow. He would get out of bed, and still half asleep, take out his violin and play it until exhaustion overcame him.

"It is the song of a fallen angel," he cried one night, tears falling down his working face. "The agony of lost glory, the utter hopelessness are all there."

Her own eyes overflowing, Anne pillowed his head on her shoulder, and murmured comfort until he fell into a sorrowful slumber. Frequently she lay awake beside him for hours. These days filled with a continuous wave of sound, left her storm-tossed and weary. Fragments of concertos thundered through her tired brain. Mingled with a sonata, the piercing sweetness of a Berçeuse; the monotonous, but beautiful precision of an exercise, until her head hummed like the inside of a seashell, and her spirit felt as void. She envied Alexis his ability to throw off a mood at will. To forget the labors of the day in the transports of the night. And yet it was this very quality which she dreaded. After hours of planning programs and listening to excerpts from problematical choices, she was expected to play the *grande amoureuse*, to respond with ardor to Alexis' quenchless thirst. If Anne's embraces were tepid, her smile a little absent, her echoing and aching head was heaped with reproaches. She did not love him any more. She never had loved him. She was fickle as the new moon, and as cold. She was thinking of marrying some one else. Yes, yes, that must be it. Who was it? That snobbish fool of a Gerald Boynton, who thought he could play the piano? (The cheek of these amateurs was amusing.) Or that Marchese, of whom Ellen was constantly hinting? Why didn't she tell him and put him out of his agony immediately? She knew he was not able to marry her, himself. He was tied hand and foot to a fond fool, who would not give him his freedom. Yes, but he would take it just the same, this precious freedom, if it tore Claire into little pieces, to wrest it from her! And so on, sometimes for an hour. Until Anne's nerves shrieked for peace, and her tongue was numb from reiterated denials. Until exhausted, Alexis would cease as suddenly as he had begun, and laying his head upon her knees, beg for the forgiveness which was so ungrudgingly granted. The humility of his joy always aroused Anne's compassion. Heavy with fatigue, sorrowful for his shame, she would allow Alexis to have his way.

It was not strange that Anne welcomed the peace of her aunt's Southern household, and basked wistfully within its sunny garden.

And yet her memories, of course, were not all irksome. There had been hours of splendid companionship, moments of exquisite communion, and it was upon these that her thoughts preferred to dwell. Alexis absent was so much more comfortable than in the flesh. Safe from his fatiguing intensity, Anne wondered how she ever could have taken his moods so seriously. And his letters were so pathetic. Incoherent, ridiculously young, they poured forth an incense of supplication that was lyrical and even beautiful. Almost biblically flowery, Anne called them her 'Songs of Alexis,' and laughed softly over their pages.

However, the situation was becoming more difficult to handle every day. Alexis' passion, increased by possession, tantalized by infrequent and stolen meetings, had become an obsession both rapturous and tragic. The thought that he had no claim upon Anne beyond that of tenderness, tortured him. Although he was careful not to mention it to her as a definite fact, Anne felt that he was doing all in his power to bring about an annulment of his marriage to Claire, and she secretly hoped that he would be unsuccessful. At his vague hints, she always laughed and told him she was not a marrying woman. That if he wanted a wife, he must look elsewhere. But she could see that it made almost no impression upon him at all. He desired their union so ardently himself that it was impossible for him to believe that Anne could refuse to marry him, once he were free. He even went so far as to depict their future life in terms both ecstatic and impractical. A patient smile upon her lips, Anne would shudder inwardly. She had neither the desire nor the intention of becoming Alexis' wife. There were almost ten years between their ages and she could imagine nothing more tragic, nor more difficult, than to be the elderly wife of a young genius. It would take endless courage to live up to his exactions, to respond to his demand. She would have to be eternally beautiful, a very river of sympathy and understanding, upon whose bosom he could float in perfect serenity and peace. In other words, mother as well as

companion, not to mention accompanist, fellow traveler, and perfect hostess. If she were sufficiently unfortunate to continue to love him, there would be scores of other women to combat, especially after the first glamour had worn off, and he had commenced to realize the difference in their ages. Even now, when he was supposedly in retirement, he received countless letters from hysterical women and girls, endless demands for interviews and photographs, which kept his newly-acquired secretary occupied most of the day. No, marriage with Alexis would not only be unspeakably wearing, but very probably spell tragedy for them both.

Meanwhile, there were precious moments to be garnered.

With renewed serenity and rested nerves, she bade farewell to the gentle little aunt, who would probably have succumbed if she had suspected to what Anne was returning. Reluctantly, but with suppressed excitement, Anne wended her way northwards.

There were only ten days left before the first recital, and she found Alexis more engrossed in his work than ever. Her little absence had in some measure restored his former independence. Almost automatically, the situation adjusted itself. They saw less and less of each other, meeting sometimes for lunch, sometimes for tea at a quiet restaurant. Anne made only one trip to Long Island. She found Alexis absent-minded, more erratic than ever. His eyes, brilliantly hard, seemed to be focussed entirely upon the future. His manner toward herself was less apologetic, more assured.

Anne took up her customary life with indifference. Seeing as little as possible of Ellen and her friends, she treated the former with a cold cordiality which if not an actual declaration of war, constituted a challenge. Gerald Boynton frequented the house as usual, however. A tame cat is a great convenience to a woman like Anne. A necessary escort, he was at her beck and call at all moments, to secure theater tickets, and even to run errands. Caldenas came to see her once or twice, and Anne found herself liking him well enough to promise to sit for her portrait.

But all this was merely artificial, a stuffing of cotton into the void of time. Weary of New York as never before, Anne longed for her villa in Florence, her sun-baked terrace, the pungent smell of the black earth awakening in anticipation of spring. Nothing but Alexis and his need could have kept her in New York another day.

Later, when the New York concerts would be over, and Alexis had gone on tour, she, too, would flit. Then he could follow her if he desired, and they might meet somewhere on the Continent. But not in Florence. No, not there, where her memories were all of Vittorio. She could not receive Alexis within a stone's throw of Vittorio's mother, that beautiful old lady, who had so often joined her pleas to his. Indeed, she could not find it in her heart to return to Florence at all, if it were not that she was so sure that Vittorio would be in Sicily. Ah, Vittorio! There was a man, if you please! A *Grand Seigneur*, and yet a worker. One of the best. Where was he now? Still in Mexico digging up Aztec relics, or had the ocean already separated them?

Arrived here, Anne would sigh and push the rebellious thought back into her teeming subconscious, much as a careless housemaid sweeps undesirables beneath the bed. By her own action, she had closed the door between Vittorio and all of his forever. Was she not above peeking through the keyhole?

She fixed her eyes resolutely upon the actualities of the present.

CHAPTER XXI

TRIUMPH

Carnegie Hall gaped before Anne's eyes, like the yawning jaws of some prehistoric monster. Knees quaking beneath her, she seated herself in the front of the box and motioned to her two companions to do likewise.

The crimson of excitement on her cheeks, emphasizing her creamy pallor, she rose from her sheath of almond-green velvet like a flame-crowned flower upon its stem. A cluster of gardenias fastened upon one shoulder, nestled against the warmer tints of her flesh.

"Anne, confess that you are nervous as the devil," giggled Gerald, slipping into a seat behind her. "You look more like an American beauty than the gardenias you affect of late." He glanced jealously at the flowers she was wearing.

Her flush deepened. Gardenias were Alexis' favorite flower and he sent them to her daily. If she failed to wear them he was heart-broken.

"It is natural for *Madame* to be nervous to-night." Caldenas interposed his plump person soothingly. "Mr. Petrovsky is her friend, is he not? And in a sense her *protégé*. It is only human to be a little excited now."

Anne forced a grateful smile. But his reminder had increased her apprehension to the point of terror.

As she looked over the packed house she shuddered involuntarily. Before just such an audience as this had Alexis failed, an eager, anticipatory audience, filling every seat, overflowing into the foyer, into a standing mob. Only then it had been as soloist with the Philharmonic. To-night he was alone, unsupported except by his accompanist. And he had chosen to begin his recital with the very concerto upon which he had broken down, that haunting, melodious, most sensuous of concertos by Lalo, known as the Spanish. True, he had played it magnificently before her many times in the last few weeks. But she had always recoiled with instinctive superstition as his audacity in repeating it upon his very first reappearance before the public. Alexis had laughed at her fear scornfully. Without the concerto, his triumph would be only half a triumph, an admission of weakness, both to himself and to the public, and a very poor tribute to Anne who had given him back to the world.

As she recalled these words, she clenched her icy hands. A thrill of exultation coursed through her stage-fright. Yes, she was giving Alexis Petrovsky back to the world. Would the gift prove worthy?

But meanwhile there was a heightened stir in the audience; a rising murmur as of new-born and rushing wind in a dense forest. The next moment, volcanic applause shook the house. Applause full of enthusiasm and tribute, containing an undercurrent of sympathy which filled Anne's eyes with a mist of tears.

Alexis and his accompanist had come on to the stage, and the American public was evincing not only its love of art, but its unconquerable tenderness of heart.

Through the mist of tears, Anne caught the brilliant gleam of Alexis' eyes, as they eagerly sought her own. Now he was bowing to the vociferous house. Looking swiftly towards Anne's box, he repeated his bow. The personal intent was unmistakable. As he turned to take the key from Paul Leon, a veritable battalion of opera-glasses was leveled upon Anne and her companions.

Faintness dragged her momentarily beneath the waves of consciousness. Her soul shrank within her. The picture of their entire intimacy from the first meeting in the hut to the present moment of exquisite apprehension flashed before her like a vision of the drowning. When she came to, the house lay silent beneath the first notes of the concerto.

All Anne's fear had been for nothing. Alexis was playing as she had never heard him play before. The golden notes lingered upon the air, round with substance, light as a sunbeam dancing upon the wall. They soared toward the sky like iridescent birds, then swooped earthwards with the beat of celestial wings. Motionless, the life concentrated in his eyes and the rhythm of his bow, his chin caressing his violin as if it were a human thing, Alexis played with all the fire, the eloquence of a modern Orpheus waiting at the gates of Hades. His features slightly haggard from emotion and over-work, were Greek. The slim body as full of grace as the faun of Praxiteles. The drooping lids seemed to conceal a very fury of genius and inspiration.

The end of the first movement was met with clamorous applause. Staid old Carnegie Hall pulled its one foot out of the grave and donned the enthusiasm of youth. Nerves relaxed in happy abandon, Anne leaned back in her chair. A flood of joyous relief swept over her from head to foot. Yes, it had not been in vain. Alexis was truly great. She felt herself a creator. At last there was a reason for her having been born.

As Alexis flung himself into the next movement, she awakened to the house about her. She glanced at the nearest boxes and had a glimpse of Ellen and Olive, surrounded by black coats and gleaming shirt-fronts. Meeting Ellen's eyes, she nodded gayly, then swept her opera-glasses across the house. A familiar face, surmounting a large and unwieldy body, caught her glance. It was Mme. Petrovsky. Although they had only met once, Anne would never forget that bland, doll-like countenance, with its cruelly undoll-like eyes. With an imperceptible shudder, she dropped her glasses into her lap. Mme. Petrovsky was unaccompanied by Claire. Was the girl ill? Or was it her own, Anne's, presence which had kept her away? A familiar sensation of guilt overwhelmed her. She felt like a child-murderer, a trampler upon flowers. She had helped to ruin Claire's life. An involuntary instrument of torture, the gods had manipulated her to the accompaniment of ironic laughter. The useless, the senseless tragedy of it all! If Alexis had only loved Claire, how different it would have been for them all. And yet would she, Anne, change it if she could? Would she be willing to relinquish into Claire's feeble fingers the rapturous moments of the last few months, this present triumph? She believed she would. But who knows, least of all himself, what tenacious devil of jealousy and lust may not be lurking within his own

subconscious fastness?

Leveling inscrutable eyes upon Mme. Petrovskoy, she caught a return flash from the babyish blue orbs. They both bowed constrainedly.

From her refuge in the back row, Claire grasped Dr. Elliott's arm. Her gaze, never long withdrawn from Anne's box, had intercepted the bow between the two women on opposite sides of the house. Her cheeks, hitherto pale, flamed crimson.

The man beside her cursed inwardly. As he had feared, the whole thing was proving too much for the poor child. He was glad that he had insisted upon accompanying her. It would have been abominable to have permitted her to come alone. She ought not to be here as it was. The glamour of Petrovskoy's music was sufficient to unnerve her, let alone his triumph. As the magic notes floated out upon the air in a very fury of perfection, Claire's companion wondered no longer at the hold that the player had obtained over her. He was just the sort of man that a woman would fall for. And having fallen, remain prostrate to be trampled upon at his will. And the creature had charm (damned if he hadn't) a sort of melancholy charm—the charm that conceals discrepancies as a tropical vine flowers about a rotten stump. No, he did not blame Claire for being infatuated with the fellow. Settling back into his seat, he sighed resignedly.

The concerto ended upon a dramatic silence. It seemed as if the whole world were holding its breath. Then a storm of applause broke out. With a shock, shattering as thunder, rhythmic as the roll of gigantic drums, Alexis was recalled over and over again. Upon one of his returns a woman in the front row threw her bunch of violets on to the stage. They dropped at Alexis' feet. He stooped, and picking them up, pressed them to his lips. The applause rose to a deafening crescendo. Cries of "bravo" punctuated the clamor shrilly. With a smile, Alexis placed the violets upon the piano, where he characteristically forgot them.

As Alexis made his last exit before the intermission, Dr. Elliott turned towards Claire. About to express enthusiastic, if unwilling praise of the performance, he stopped short at sight of her face. The small features were convulsed into a mask of agony. She was weeping softly, weakly, as if her very blood were seeping out with her tears.

"You must let me take you home at once," he exclaimed under the general uproar.

Without a protest she followed him out into the aisle, "Yes," she whispered, "I didn't think that I would disgrace myself like this. I suppose I ought to have taken your advice and not come. But oh, I wanted to so much. I was so afraid for him, you know. I had a silly feeling that my love might help him, even if he didn't care or know that I was there!" She sobbed beneath her breath. "But I see he didn't need me after all," she added, as they fought their way out into the lobby.

Anne's impressions of the intermission were hazy. Barely conscious of the inroad of visitors upon her box, she answered their sallies with the mechanical ease of long habit. To Ellen's repeated pleas that she should come down to MacDougal Alley and play poker after the concert, she was amiably curt. She had a headache. Ellen knew she detested cards. If Ellen suspected a reason for Anne's refusal, she gave no hint. But her eyes rested upon the emerald pendant maliciously. She is going to meet him afterwards, she mused.

The last half of the program met with as vociferous an approval. The *Préludium* and *Allegro* of Pugnani, a serenade by Kreisler, some of Brahms's Hungarian Dances were played as only a few can play them. A sonata of Schumann breathed exquisite tears.

After the concert was over, there was a clamor for encores. Pale, but exultant, Alexis was generous, and gave of his best. Laughing, dancing tunes, that sent everybody home happy.

As the last notes of a Wienawski waltz died away, he left the stage for the last time and the audience rose *en masse* and made for the exit. A chattering, excited throng, Anne regarded it through grateful tears.

"Well, shall we go? Or do you intend to spend all night in the sanctuary?" Gerald held out Anne's chinchilla cape with a mocking glance. "Did the little tin god perform satisfactorily, or was she disappointed?"

She slipped into her cape with a nonchalant air.

"The little tin god is solid gold all the way through, I'm inclined to believe. But as he has descended from the altar, we might as well move along."

"If you are not coming to MacDougal Alley, may I not see you home, Madame?" Caldenas bowed like a dignified cherub.

"Oh, no, thank you, Caldenas, please don't trouble. After music like this I prefer to be alone. I'm sure you understand?"

She stepped to the railing and picked up her gloves and her opera glasses. As she did so, her eyes swept absently over the dispersing crowd and lighted upon a tall man almost directly beneath her. Something familiar about the cut of his head, the slope of his broad shoulders, penetrated her to the core. She leaned over the railing in sudden apprehension. As if in response, the man turned and their glances flamed to a focus.

With a confusion at once sickening and sweet, Anne found herself looking into the eyes of Vittorio Torrigiani. For a second, she felt as if all the blood in her body had seeped to her heart. Then it poured back in a crimson stream from her feet to the roots of her hair. An instinctive desire for flight overcame her. She turned and made for the back of the box, where Gerald was patiently waiting. Vittorio, how ghastly! How could she ever face him? And yet after that flaming interchange of glances, how could she let him go? She returned to the railing and called after the retreating figure softly. From the back of the box Gerald watched her in amazement.

"Vittorio?"

"Anne!"

A moment later and he stood within the box. He took her icy fingers in his and pressed them to his lips.

"I had not intended to have you see me," he said quietly. "Please don't think that I meant to intrude, *cara*. Only as I was passing by Carnegie Hall I saw the announcement of the concert. I couldn't resist

coming in, and perhaps catching a farewell glimpse of you."

"A farewell glimpse?" Her voice faltered. He looked down at her longingly.

"Yes, I am sailing for Sicily in the morning."

"So soon! Without even letting me know! How long have you been in New York?"

"I arrived from Mexico this morning. I didn't think you would want to see me, *cara*. That is why I didn't let you know. Besides—there are some things a man cannot bear," he added beneath his breath so that Gerald wouldn't hear.

"Vittorio!" Her whisper was broken. "I must see you before you go."

His downcast face suddenly became eager.

"May I go home with you now, then?"

The crimson stain filtered back into her pale cheeks.

"No, Vittorio. I'm afraid not. I—shall not be free," she finished with a little agonized rush.

The new radiance drained from his face as suddenly as it had come.

"Then we shall have to wait for another trip. Until you come to Florence perhaps?" Repressed suffering harshened his voice.

Humiliated to the point of anguish, she was about to acquiesce, when she encountered his tragic eyes.

"Why can't you drive home with me? We will take a turn about the park and have a little talk. I—I have a message for your mother."

His features relaxed a trifle. "Not the message she is hoping for, I fear," he sighed.

In the corridor behind the box he greeted Gerald, who had retired there with unusual tact.

"I warn you, I'm eloping with the Marchese," laughed Anne nervously. "He is sailing in the morning and it is our only chance for a chat. We're going for a turn around the park. Isn't it devilish of us?"

"Devilish selfish," Gerald's laugh rang forced. He followed them out into the lobby with sulky dignity.

As they threaded their way through the dwindling crowd upon the sidewalk, Anne met the imperturbable stare of a pair of China-blue eyes. A basilisk stare that fastened itself upon them as she and Vittorio entered her motor and drove away.

CHAPTER XXII

ANTI-CLIMAX

After Anne dropped Vittorio at his hotel blankness fell upon her; the limitless blankness of a solitary planet whirling in space. A loneliness devastating as the fear of death. What a strange, unaccompanied thing the soul was. How horribly alone. How impossible for it to merge with another.

Not a weeping woman, Anne was conscious of an intolerable ache in her throat, an intolerable emptiness in the heart. She and Vittorio had parted once again, and this time it had hurt, as if her very flesh had been riven apart. And yet, so alone is the soul, so dumb in its self-expression, that the short drive had appeared neither tragic nor momentous. Merely unfruitful and incomplete.

A *malaise* had lain upon them from the very beginning. A creeping paralysis had bound their tongues to trivialities, their souls to silence and constraint. And yet Anne felt as if neither of them would ever forget this night. Nor how beautiful the park had looked, like a scene in a Russian opera, with the snow blossoming upon the trees like gigantic flowers. Skyscrapers, luminous against the heavens, impregnable castles of supermen, had flung a challenge into space. Their diamond-studded windows were more brilliant than the stars.

But inside the car it had been warm, even cozy. Vittorio's shoulder had brushed against hers. His profile only half visible, had leaned towards her. The scent of his cigarettes still lingered upon the air with a hint of comfort. She stretched out her hand and touched the place where he had sat. It was still warm. Some of his vitality remained as if to console her. He had actually sat there a few moments ago in the flesh. And now there was only a vague hint of warmth,—and emptiness. How could a thing be one moment, and yet not only vanish the next, but even seem as if it had never existed? Was it possible that nothing was real, after all? How strange a thing is the fluidity of time. The past flowed into the present. The present welled into the future, and swept onwards like a mighty river, towards the ocean of eternity, whence came its source. Encircling the globe in its rushing current, it carried one upon its bosom, helpless but protesting from the vast gray sea of birth to the vast gray sea of death, which in the end are one and the same.

What a mystery it all was, a problem. Heavy with weariness, Anne's smile showed drearily from beneath a passing arc light. Protest, rebellion? What was the use of either, if one were only a leaf upon the swirl of heavy waters? To stay the flow for the fraction of a second was an impossibility denied even to the gods.

Things were like that. A little while ago she and Vittorio had sat here, side by side, and uttered trivialities. The moment was gone forever and he with it. Carried upon it as if by a substance more powerful than flesh and blood. And now that he was no longer there, that he no longer existed in time, it seemed, she could think of a thousand things that they might have said to each other.

As it was, she scarcely remembered that they had exchanged more than a few phrases. Yet of course that could have been hardly possible. She recalled asking him how he had enjoyed his stay in Mexico, and scarcely listening for the reply. She had a vague impression that he had found it interesting. He had spoken at some length about a friend of his, a Spaniard, whose diggings he had visited near Mexico City, where the remains of an ancient civilization, entirely concealed by lava, were in the process of discovery. Bodies had been found, almost perfectly preserved in the positions in which the fiery death had caught them. The very utensils in their hands were unbroken. Some of the bodies were being placed in glass cases, to be exhibited in the Museum in Mexico City. Anne had laughed foolishly at this point, making some banal remark about how embarrassing it must have been for the poor creatures, as if one were caught with one's hair in curl-papers.

But her ridiculous laughter had helped, if only momentarily, to break through the crust of constraint which lay upon them both like the coating of lava upon the little city he was telling her of. Vittorio had turned to her abruptly, and asked if she were happy. The tremor in his voice had startled her.

"Is any one ever happy?" she had evaded.

But he had insisted upon knowing the truth.

"For God's sake, tell me Anne. It can't hurt me half as much as to feel that you are suffering or have made a frightful mistake. I don't think I could quite bear that!"

"I suppose I am happy," her reply had been somewhat uncertain. "I didn't expect to be happy, you know."

But her answer had not pleased him. Perhaps he had considered it both priggish and insincere. For his voice was incredulous and slightly mocking as he had proceeded.

"Oh, Anne, admit it. You are madly in love with him? What woman wouldn't be? He is a genius. This evening proved that if nothing else. As I listened to him, chills coursed up my spine. Chills of admiration, and yes, I might as well own up to it, chills of hatred and of jealousy. I am a man, and I suffered. He is too beautiful, Anne. He reminds me of a small statuette I once dug up near Messina, and which was since destroyed in the earthquake. Of course you love him, Anne. It goes without saying. And I prefer to have you honest about it."

His tone had both distressed and annoyed her. Why did men always take things for granted? Even Vittorio, who had known her for the last ten years could not seem to understand the many-faceted urge which impelled her actions.

"But Vittorio, I don't think I do love him," she had remonstrated patiently. "That is, I'm not in love with him. He is really more like a child than a man in some ways. A fascinating, precocious child, of course, but sometimes a very naughty one!"

And then she was sorry to have admitted so much, for she sensed that her words had resounded upon Vittorio's heart like a blow.

"Not that he's not good to me," she hastened to add, impelled by pride and pity. "A bit difficult at times, because he knows that he cannot make me his wife. But I don't really mind. For I'm so sorry for

him."

The rest of the drive had proceeded in stark silence, punctuated at intervals by those scattered inanities by which one strives to cover the nakedness of the soul.

As he sat beside her to-night, Anne surmised the torture that Vittorio had undergone. Her knowledge of his character was founded upon years of comradeship. A proud man, it must have been sheer agony for him to realize her anomalous position. To feel that she had been content to take second best when he had offered her his all so many times and been rejected. And yet although it was inevitable that he should suffer, not once had he made her feel any lessening of his respect, or even of his love. He had understood so much better than most men the impulse of pity that lay back of her surrender. He had seemed to comprehend, too, the temporal quality of it all. Anne knew that if she would leave Alexis and go to Vittorio some day he would not only consider her as unsmirched as before, but possibly better for the experience. He was unique among men in that he realized the sacrificial quality of her action. The only thing that he would not forgive would be hypocrisy. Of that she was aware, to her despair. For it was this very thing that had severed them like a sword when they parted. Vittorio believed that out of some motive of pity, and possibly of modesty, Anne was deceiving him about her feeling for Alexis. She knew he believed this and yet she was as powerless to undeceive him as she was to take up the imaginary sword that lay between them and thrust it into her living breast. Oh, why had she not obeyed her instinct for flight, and avoided this perilous encounter? What a tragedy of errors they had all drifted into. What a farce it was. A trick of the ironical gods who dig colossal fingers into one's ribs and expect one to laugh like a babe being tickled. Why had Vittorio returned to-night of all nights? To-night when she had been riding upon the pinnacle? Why had their eyes encountered in that shattering glance, which had flung her once more into the abyss of doubt and fear? She had felt so exultant in Alexis' triumph. So eager to pour renewed radiance upon his victory and his fatigue. And now the desire had completely departed, sucked into the mud of anti-climax.

But this mood was not only foolish, but dangerous. To-night was big with significance. She must retain the glamor at all costs. To-night belonged to Alexis. It was his triumph and re-entry into his birthright. Upon it, his genius had emerged, new-born and greater than ever before, as if in temporary recoil it had acquired impetus. Yes, to-night was Alexis' and hers, for was it not her love that had re-created him? Was not his inspiration begotten of their passion as truly as if it had been a child of flesh and blood? No, Alexis must never suspect the still-born quality of her joy. Nor that she was relying upon his living blaze to rekindle her own flame.

To-night had a special significance too, in the fact that she was permitting him to come to her in her own house for the first time since they had become lovers. Fear that the servants, those ancient slave-drivers of convention, might talk, had hitherto rendered her cautious. But this was a special occasion for which she had decided to break all rules. It would have been intolerable not to have rejoiced together to-night. And sacrilege to have done so in public. Even now she had been discreet and arranged for most of her household to be out. Regina alone, had prepared the little supper, which was to be served before the fire in the upstairs sitting-room. Regina, who would have returned from the concert herself, and who had probably shed tears of joy over Alexis' triumph. Dear old Regina of the keen eyes and wise heart, who, suspecting all, had never let fall a hint or a reproach. Poor Regina, who had not permitted herself to speak of the Marchese since his departure, and whose plucky spirit was, as Anne knew, heavy with nostalgia for Florence and the beloved villa.

CHAPTER XXIII

DISSONANCE

The car had turned an abrupt corner and stopped before the house. Regina opened the door, a metamorphosed Regina clad in concert regalia, very respectable and solid. Upon her face an expression of exaltation was overlaid by one of anxiety. Anne attributed the exaltation to the concert. Regina had all the Latin's adoration for music. But the anxiety was somewhat puzzling.

"Has Mr. Petrovsky arrived?"

Regina nodded. The black brows knitted themselves above troubled eyes. "He awaits in the sitting-room, *Signora*."

Something was very much the matter. Had Alexis been snubbing the poor old dear? Anne assumed a gay nonchalance.

"Well, was it not a concert after your own heart, Regina? A triumph and a marvel?"

The woman raised knotted hands to heaven. "He is an angel, *Signora*! Inspired by the *Madonna* and all the saints. He could melt the heart of the devil himself, not to speak of poor old Regina!" Her face fell suddenly. "After a *trionfo* like that, he should be gay as the bird. But he is not, *Signora mia*. He walk up the stairs with a face like one black cloud. He never say a word to poor Regina!"

"He is tired. You must excuse him. He is usually so nice to you, you know."

"Ah, *si, si!*"

Anne proceeded slowly up the stairs. So she would have to cope with a mood! Ennui surged over her. In that moment she understood fully the weary distaste of a man who has to deal with a hysterical woman. Oh, why was Alexis so temperamental? She shrugged, and turning the knob of the sitting room door, entered.

Apparently unoccupied, the only light came from the cheerful fire which chuckling upon the hearth like a contented hen, lent an amber glow to the paneled walls where Sargent's portrait of Anne's mother smiled gently in its antiquated garb. Anne pressed her finger on the electric button by the door. A golden stream flooded the shadowy corners. Upon a sofa at the extreme end of the room lay Alexis. At her approach, he drew an audible, almost sobbing breath, and sat up and faced her. The thick hair rumbled into a comb over knotted brows, his eyes were somber.

"Where have you been? I thought you would never come!" He walked swiftly towards her.

As Anne heard the stricken note in his voice, her heart melted into a pool of tears. She ran forward and encircled him with her arms, as one would a sorrowful child.

"I didn't think you would be here so soon," she exclaimed contritely. "I imagined there would be a swarm of people waiting to fall upon you with congratulations. Was I wrong?"

He trembled beneath her hold. She released him with a weary little sigh. Her doubt had evidently ruffled his vanity.

"Of course there was a crowd. But I only spoke to a few personal friends, and one or two reporters. Rosenfield told the rest I was too exhausted to speak to them, which, was a lie, God knows, for I never felt less tired in all my life. You see, I was thinking of you and this meeting." He laughed loudly.

She ignored his angry eyes with a feeling of guilt. "But Alexis, what a triumph! How proud you have made me!" She caressed his shoulders with gentle hands.

He flung himself from her hold. "Then why, if you are so proud and happy, have you kept me waiting while you go motoring with another man?"

A milk-white pallor overspread Anne's cheeks. She flung off her coat and seated herself before the fire.

"So that is what is the matter?" In the glow of the flames her hair encircled her face like a brazen nimbus. Alabaster skin shone luminous against the opaque white of the gardenias upon her shoulder. Alexis' gaze bit into her beauty angrily.

"Isn't that enough? Isn't it enough that you should leave me to-night for another man? To-night which was mine by right? Desert me for a stranger at the very doors of Carnegie Hall?" The clenched hands became livid.

"But Alexis, give me a chance to explain. It was all an accident. Entirely unpremeditated."

"An accident! I shouldn't call it exactly that! Who was this man with whom a *tête-à-tête* was so necessary that you couldn't wait until to-morrow?"

"It was the *Marchese* Torrigiani, since you ask. I would have told you before if your torrential abuse had permitted." She replied quietly.

"But I thought he was in Italy!"

"So he will be in another week. He is sailing to-morrow." The regret in her tone angered Alexis.

"But what is he doing in New York again? Or has he been here all the time?" He inquired with quick suspicion.

"I am not in the habit of lying, Alexis."

Her composure frightened him. He threw out his arms in a beseeching gesture.

"Have pity on me, Anne. I don't mean to hurt you. But I'm so unhappy!"

The cold light died out of her eyes.

"There's nothing to be so miserable about, Alexis. Torrigiani has been in Mexico all this time. He merely stopped on his way back to Italy. He hadn't even let me know that he was here. He happened to be passing by Carnegie Hall to-night and saw the notices of your concert. Our meeting was entirely accidental, and nothing to torture yourself about. As it seemed to be our only chance for a talk, I drove him around the park and left him at his hotel."

He flung himself at her feet in his customary gesture of penitence.

"Oh, Anne, forgive me if I seem cruel and suspicious. But are you in love with this man?"

She laid her hand on the tumbled fair hair.

"No, dear, of course not. But I do care for and respect him almost more than any one I know. No one, not even you could ever come between us, and I don't want you to try."

He looked at her with tragedy-ridden eyes.

"I have a terrible premonition that you are going to marry Torrigiani some time, and I am ready to kill him when I think of it."

"Don't commit any murders as yet!" Her laugh sounded forced. "I am not going to marry him or any other man, yourself included!"

He rose to his feet with the cry of a wounded animal. "You do love him. You cannot hide it from me any longer, Anne. As soon as I leave New York you are going to Italy to meet him. Deny it if you can!"

"Of course I'm going to Italy, Alexis. There could be nothing to keep me here after you go. I am homesick for Florence and my garden. But I'm not going there to meet Vittorio."

"Yes, you are. And you are afraid to tell me for fear my music will suffer. But it won't. Nothing can ever take it from me now. Least of all a woman's whim!"

A grim smile sketched itself upon Anne's lips. Alexis' temper she had borne with before. But his ingratitude was new, and wounded.

"If I'm not necessary to you, perhaps it is just as well that we are separating so soon!"

"So I was right, after all!" he exclaimed with a certain tragic satisfaction.

She determined to punish him.

"Perhaps, who knows? Life with Vittorio would at least be peaceful. He is neither temperamental nor a genius. Just a mere man who believes in me. His bruised feelings wouldn't have to be perpetually coddled!"

"If that is the way you feel about me, Anne, I had better go!" Beads of moisture about his temples, Alexis made for the door.

She followed him, and drew him back into the room.

"Don't be silly, dearest. You know I don't want you to go!"

He wheeled in her arms, and kissed her with tragic passion. His face was wet with tears.

"Oh, Anne, if I should lose you!"

"You won't, poor dear, you won't!" she cried brokenly.

She drew him down on to the chaise-longue beside her. He laid his head upon her shoulder.

"Torrighiani will not be in Florence," she explained, leaning her cheek against the thick, soft hair. "He expects to go direct to Sicily. If he were to be there I should not want to go. It would be too humiliating."

"Does he know? Have you told him about us?" There was a throb of incredulous joy in Alexis' voice.

"Yes." Her head drooped beneath the crimson stain that surged up to her forehead.

"Oh, Anne, can you ever forgive me?"

"Yes, dear. Only don't try me too often. Just take me for granted sometimes."

"Oh, I mean to, God knows. Only I'm so afraid of losing you. There are so many men in your life. And I am tied." She laid commanding fingers upon his lips.

"That subject is taboo! Don't you dare bring it up again! But tell me how did you know about Torrigiani!" she inquired with a certain curiosity. Had the probing blue orbs belonged to Mme. Petrovsky after all?

"My mother told me," he replied simply. "She saw you go out together. She came behind to see me afterward. However, I scarcely believed her. I thought she must have mistaken some one else for you. She had only seen you once, you know. But when I arrived, and you hadn't come, I suddenly knew it was all true. I wanted to strangle poor old Regina and her congratulations. That was almost an hour ago. I was just thinking of going when you came."

She pressed his head against her slim bosom. "Poor darling, it must have been awful. But you didn't suppose I could forget that I had invited you to supper to-night of all nights?"

"I'm a fool, I realize it. But I'm so mad about you, I'm really not sane," he whispered, his lips against the satin of her throat. "You're an angel to put up with me."

She laughed and put him aside. Springing to her feet she gave the bell-rope a vigorous pull. "Nonsense! No angel could possibly be as hungry as I am at present. Let us see what Regina can do for us."

But the appetite was rather a pretense on both sides. They were too excited to eat. With a discreet smile, Regina wheeled in the supper on a tea wagon, and insisted upon leaving them immediately, in spite of Alexis' efforts to make up for his former unamiability.

"The *Signorino* must eat. Even music must die on the empty stomach."

There were oysters on the half-shell, cold duck and a varicolored salad that rivaled a Neapolitan sunset. Alexis opened the champagne himself.

"It was awfully banal to have it," laughed Anne. "But we simply had to to-night, you know." She raised her glass and smiled at him, over its miniature golden cauldron. "To Alexis Petrovsky and his triumph!"

"To the power behind the throne," he countered.

The seething wine whipped their spirits. Between parted lips, their teeth gleamed like crescent moons.

"Oh, Alexis, you don't know what to-night has meant to me. Your success was as intoxicating as a personal triumph."

"It was one, wasn't it? Since I owe every bit of it to you?" His eyes were full of worship.

"Don't say that. The power was within yourself. I merely set it in motion again. I fully believe it would have returned to you eventually."

"I'm not so sure of that. I was pretty nearly done for, when you retrieved me. How can I ever thank you enough?"

He got up from the table, and running around to her side, threw his arms about her shoulders. She tossed back her head and their lips met.

"Don't think of that now," she murmured, as he dropped to his knees beside her. Conscious of the

pathetic weariness in her voice, an icy band tightened about his heart. He must be more careful, or he would lose her entirely. Ah, how clumsy he had been! What a fool to let her slip through his fingers in that mad fashion. Like a woman who fears to lose her lover, he must exert all his charm, every vestige of personality he possessed in order to retain her. The band tightening about his heart, he smiled up at her with pathetic blandishment.

"You are so beautiful to-night in your gown of palest green," he whispered. "Like Venus rising from the waves. I adore you more every minute."

She laughed softly in her throat. "You are an incorrigible baby, Alexis. Come, get up and eat a little more supper, or Regina will be disappointed."

"I will, if I can put my chair next to yours."

"Of course, foolish one!" She watched with a tender, rather tired little smile, while he moved his chair from across the table.

"Tell me, were you frightened to-night?"

He laughed happily.

"Not for a moment. It seemed as if I had the confidence of a thousand devils!"

"That is more than I can say for myself. I had an awful attack of stage-fright. My knees rattled beneath me!"

"You do care, don't you?" His voice was exultant.

"Very much more than you will ever guess, Alexis!"

"Darling!" He squeezed her hand ecstatically.

"When you play at the Philharmonic on Friday I'll not be afraid at all."

He looked at her tenderly. "Why should you be if I'm not, sweetheart? You mustn't make yourself ill over me. You've heard me play the Brahms's Concerto many times, and you know that it is mine, or rather that I am its!"

They laughed at his comical way of putting it.

"I intend to play it in Boston next week, too," he continued. "How I loathe these trips that take me away from you! When the ocean separates us I shall be wild. But you will join me as soon as you can on the Continent? If you don't want me to come to Florence we can meet in Venice, perhaps. I have set my heart on Venice. Think of us in a palazzo over the pole-shadowed waters. We will wind in and out of the tiny canals, in a gondola beneath a golden moon, and I will play to you."

"You would take all the trade from the Grand Canal, and we should be solitary for about half a second!"

They laughed.

"Come, is it a bargain?"

"Of course," she was a little breathless. "And in the mornings we can bathe at the Lido."

"The mornings! They can take care of themselves! It is the nights, the glorious, moon-ridden nights that I am thinking of. I will hold you in my arms on a dim, star-lit balcony, while the gondolas swish by below and the water laps against the base of our walls."

"And tourists rend the heavens with raucous laughter!"

He swept her into his arms impetuously.

"Anne, let me stay to-night. Don't send me back to Gramercy Park alone."

His heart-beats against her cheek, she demurred faintly.

"Impossible, darling. You must go. Indeed, you ought to be going now. The servants may return at any moment."

"And what difference does that make? Pray, do they invade your sitting room at this hour of the night?"

"No—but Regina——"

"Can put you to bed, as usual. I shall have gone, you see. But I can come back. There are such things as latch-keys, aren't there?"

"If you should be caught!" Her heart swooped in delightful fear.

"But I shan't," he countered triumphantly. "In the morning I shall creep out long before your lordly butler is awake. Surely, you can't refuse me anything to-night?"

Her laugh was smothered against his breast. She could feel his heart knocking against her lips.

"Romeo and Juliet all over again, without even omitting the nurse!" she murmured. "It is really awfully unoriginal of us, you know."

His lips within the brazen gold of her hair, he laughed exultantly.

A few minutes later the street door closed with rather unnecessary emphasis. Roused from her doze in Anne's bedroom, Regina started up thankfully. The *Signorino* was gone. That was good. That was as it should be. Now her lady could have a reposeful night. She had looked so weary this evening!

CHAPTER XXIV

TRICKERY

The conventional living room was rendered gay by masses of spring flowers. Padding from vase to vase, Mme. Petrovsky inhaled their fragrance with triumphant nostrils. A tribute to her motherhood from some of Alexis' admirers, she breathed them in luxuriantly.

Now that Alexis had become a personage again, there was no telling what the future might contain. Visions of reconciliation loomed enticingly before her. If he came to-night, and he would surely come (she had worded her letter with guile) she had that to suggest which ought to render him eternally grateful. The hated stumbling block, once removed from his path, he would turn to her again and she would bask not only in the vicarious sunshine of his fame, but in those benign social rays shed by his pinnacle amongst the élite. And it would be she, his mother, who had thrust him there.

Not that she really hated Claire. Poor, dear child, she had been very useful up to the time of the marriage, and even afterwards—for a while! But now she was no longer desirable. The other woman could do so much more for Alexis. Abetted by fortune and prestige, his genius would soar untrammelled. Claire must be forced to see reason. Gently, of course, if possible. But if she refused (Mme. Petrovsky shrugged) drastic measures must be applied.

Besides, she was sick of the very sight of the girl. Heavy-bodied and heavy-eyed, she crept about the rooms like a doomed Madonna. Her idle days seemed to pass in a dread anticipation, as if the horizon were stunted, the whole future cramped into the next few weeks. That her thoughts did not progress beyond the birth of the child, Mme. Petrovsky was almost certain, although a deep-seated joy over Alexis' success shone from the somber eyes, when she read the criticisms in the papers. After a concert, she would sometimes sit for hours, the articles crumpled in ardent hands, only showing animation when Dr. Elliott came around. Then she would dress with unusual care, and covering her clumsy little figure with a heavy coat, sally forth to dinner or the theater with a grateful air, very irritating to a bored mother-in-law. At such times, Mme. Petrovsky suspected Claire of using rouge. For the small face bloomed into unexpected beauty.

That Dr. Elliott found it so, was amusingly apparent to the watchful older woman, whose eyes, more subtle than those of Claire, pierced his armor to the palpitating, defenseless flesh. Decidedly, the man was in love with Claire. Whether this love had been declared was problematical and immaterial. It suited Mme. Petrovsky's purpose, and provided her with a weapon almost invincible. That the weapon was poisoned, contrary to the laws of honorable warfare, troubled her not one whit.

And to-night the stage was set, the scene garnished for the blow. The time itself nicely calculated. To insure her *tête-à-tête*, Mme. Petrovsky had chosen an evening when she knew that Claire expected to go to the movies with the doctor. She had even taken the precaution to send Ito out. His stolid devotion to the girl might prove a nuisance. And she did not intend to risk any eavesdropping from behind pantry doors.

As the time approached for Alexis to come, her calm, superficially stolid, was agitated to the depths. Beyond a few words, after his recital, this was the first opportunity she had had for an interview, and the very utmost must be gleaned from it. There was no telling when another would be forthcoming; so unfilial had Alexis become. Perhaps when the fear of encountering Claire had been removed, his visits might become more frequent. Of the absurdity of hoping that he ever would live with her again, she was not guilty. When the bird has once flown, the nest soon becomes outgrown. It would not even be desirable. In the dazzling future, Alexis would necessarily reside (her own pompous word) elsewhere.

The weaving of these half-poetic, entirely vulgar dreams filled the woman with anticipatory satisfaction. When the door-bell shrilled, it surprised her. She responded in dignified leisure that belied the turmoil within.

"It's Ito's evening out," she explained rather effusively.

Stiff, very correct, Alexis answered her smile with constraint. As he hung his hat and coat upon the rack, a wave of nausea sickened him; an influx of memories not to be borne. Not for anything in the world, except the veiled promise contained in his mother's letter, would he have entered here again. He followed her into the living room, glancing about him apprehensively.

"You said Claire would not be at home," he articulated thickly.

"And so she isn't!" Mme. Petrovsky plumped herself into a large tapestry chair and motioned him to do likewise.

"She and Dr. Elliott have gone out on one of their little sprees."

Her sprightly manner irritated Alexis unbearably, and he was silent.

"I thought it would be nice for us to be alone. Don't you think so?"

"I have no desire to see Claire, as you know."

"So I imagine, dear boy. But don't let us speak of that now. First I want to congratulate you upon your success. It simply delights me. You're twice as good as ever. More assured, more mature. Your rendering of the Brahms' Concerto was perfection. Lauer was transported by it. He said you were the best pupil he had ever had."

Alexis's eyes lighted momentarily at the mention of his old master.

"He came around to see me afterwards and was—very kind," he said almost eagerly.

"He ought to be pleased! Even Sascha doesn't do him more credit!" she exclaimed with complacency.

But the glow had departed from Alexis' face. He had not come to discuss music, and he wished she would get to the point.

Although she could not always comprehend his moods, his impatience did not escape her now.

"I suppose you are wondering why I wrote you to come to-night?"

"Frankly, yes."

"May I speak plainly?"

"Why not?"

"It has not taken much intuition on my part to know that you would like to divorce Claire."

He avoided the over-eager gaze. His mother's attitude towards Claire had always filled him with distaste. "I think a divorce would be better for us both."

His obvious reluctance made her impatient.

"What have you done about it?" she asked with a return of the imperious manner.

He raised offended brows, but replied quietly enough. "I have applied to Rome for an annulment."

She laughed curtly.

"Do you think there is a chance of its being granted?"

"Perhaps not. But I have stated the facts and hope to get justice."

Her lips curled disdainfully. "There isn't the slightest chance for you, Alexis. Claire is a devoted daughter of the Church, and they won't risk losing her for an agnostic like yourself. If I were you, I shouldn't lay any hopes upon it, but put all my energy into procuring a divorce."

"But Claire refuses to divorce me. It would be easy enough for her, God knows, if she wanted to!"

"On the charge of desertion, I suppose!" A smile played about the tiny mouth.

His anger disdained subterfuge. "On the charge of infidelity."

She shook her head, mandarin-wise. "But that would ruin your career."

"Why should it? People don't go to hear an artist because he's a woolly lamb. Music isn't dependent upon the blue laws. If Puritans were able to interpret it, I know many a Symphony that would have to be discarded."

Her laugh was full of *camaraderie*. "You are right. But suppose you should want to marry again? The scandal might prove a detriment to the lady."

He looked disconcerted. It had never occurred to him that Anne's reputation might suffer if his freedom came as the result of scandal. It had been abominably careless of him. But why worry since Claire refused to divorce him?

His mother noted his discomfiture with amusement. When she considered that he had sufficiently digested it, she tackled him once again.

"It is you who must do the divorcing," she announced judicially.

"I?" He stared at her in bewilderment. "But that would be impossible. In the first place it would be dastardly. In the second, there are no grounds, as you know."

"Are there not?" Her smile angered him.

"I'm sure I don't know what we are talking about. We are getting nowhere. If you have any communication to make, please do so at once, as I have an engagement."

The baby-blue stare narrowed into a slit. "Wasn't it natural that I should desire to see my own son again?" she asked sweetly.

He looked sulky. "If you are anxious about money, arrangements are being made for both you and Claire, which ought to secure you an ample income. That is, if my strong right arm continues to wield the bow."

"That is generous of you, my son." She waved a gracious hand. A dissatisfied look crept into her eyes. "But since you insist upon being so frank, I may as well tell you that money has nothing to do with my invitation. I asked you to come because I can help you, if not in your career, at least in your happiness."

"My happiness? I don't understand you!"

She continued to smile blandly. "I think I can show you a way out of your marriage."

"How?" His scornful eyes were incredulous.

Mme. Petrovskiy smoothed her silken lap, as a cat smoothes its fur. "There is a man in Claire's life, Alexis."

"I don't believe you!"

She nodded ponderously. "She is out with him now."

"Oh, you mean the doctor?" There was comical relief in his voice. "What harm is there in that?"

"Much harm could be construed from it. Besides, the man is in love with her."

Alexis stared. The idea of any one being in love with Claire seemed both preposterous and impertinent.

"What makes you think so?"

"He is here almost every day. They go out together at least one night a week."

"He is probably sorry for her, or lonesome, or both! You're not trying to insinuate there is anything wrong!" The male's hatred of being betrayed, even when it affords him a loophole for escape rang in his voice.

"One must avoid the appearance of evil," she said sanctimoniously.

"Nonsense. What are you driving at? If you don't approve of what they are doing, why do you permit it, as Claire is presumably under your protection?"

"Sometimes it is better to let matters run their course." She fixed her eyes upon him cunningly. A flicker of comprehension twisted his features.

"So you were willing to abet them?" he retorted with contempt. "'Adultery made easy for beginners,' or 'Homely Hints from a Fond Mother-in-law!' Oh, this is detestable! I am going!" He flung his hair out of his eyes and started towards the hall.

"I merely tried to help you," she followed him with ponderous lightness. "You may be sorry that you didn't take advantage of my advice."

He started to put on his coat. "But I don't believe any of this, mother. It is all such utter rot. Claire is incapable of such a thing."

"Perhaps she is, and perhaps she isn't! At any rate, how could she prove her innocence?"

She laid a heavy hand upon Alexis's arm. He shrank away.

"Do you imagine I would ruin an innocent woman? What kind of a man do you think I am?"

She shrugged fat shoulders. "Not if it were avoidable, of course. But how do you know she is

innocent? She has had every opportunity to deceive you. A lonely woman will do desperate things, Alexis. Love is a great temptation to a girl like Claire, and half a loaf is better than none!"

"But Claire! I can't imagine Claire being unfaithful. She is the most loyal creature alive."

"She may be loyal, but she is also passionate. You at least should retain some memory of that." The innocent eyes concealed amusement.

He flushed. The memory of Claire's surrenders was like a vague but abject nightmare. Yes, the girl possessed a lurid kind of passivity, a submission as unlike Anne's goddess-like generosity as night from day. Mme. Petrovsky pursued her advantage.

"It remains to be seen which of the two traits is the stronger."

"I believe I know. It would take Claire's own words to convince me to the contrary." But his manner was less ironical, almost receptive.

Mme. Petrovsky took up her theme complacently. "Think it over, Alexis. Don't permit an obstinate girl to ruin your life. You love another woman—"

A dangerous gleam in his eye, he checked her quickly. "We will not speak of that!"

"Very well. Only, as I was going to say before, it is not as if you loved Claire and she could keep you. By clinging stubbornly to you, she is merely ruining her own life as well. I believe Dr. Elliott would marry her if she were free."

A new eagerness flitted over Alexis' face. "If I thought there was a chance of that!"

"She would have to be forced into it, of course. She is as obstinate about her religion as she is weak about you."

"I don't intend to force her! I'm sorry I came. When I received your letter I thought you would have something tangible to suggest. Something beside these brutalities."

"I offer you freedom and you call me names!" The tiny mouth pursed with rage. "But wait a moment, I'm afraid you can't go now. They're back from the movies. Isn't that the elevator?"

The blood receded from Alexis's face. Yes, surely that was Claire's voice approaching the door. Would to God he had never come!

A key clicked in the lock and Claire stood upon the threshold. Behind her Dr. Elliott turned white as he saw Alexis. Placing a mechanical arm about Claire, he piloted her in. She fell into a chair beside the door.

"Alexis!" Tears streamed from her eyes. Her voice was feeble.

He sprang forward with a cry of pity and bent over her. "I'm sorry I frightened you, Claire."

"I'm so silly," she murmured. "Only last night I dreamed that you had returned again!"

"Poor child!" His face contracted in a spasm of pain.

"I—I want to tell you how happy I am over your success! I heard you at the Philharmonic yesterday and—and it was glorious!"

"You are always so generous," he felt broken with shame.

"Generous! You call it that?" she retorted scornfully. Drawing her cape about her carefully, she preceded them into the living room. "Come in, Robert, I want you to meet my—my husband," she added, with a pathetic assumption of ease.

A grim expression on his face, the young doctor broke his silence.

"I can only stay a few minutes. I ought to go back to the hospital," he said gruffly. But if Claire needed him, he would not fail her.

Mme. Petrovsky smiled, as she caught his belligerent eye. "Do stay, we will have a nice little chat."

"I hear you have been to the movies," said Alexis, after they had settled themselves more or less stiffly about the room. Why in hell didn't the man get out?

"Dr. Elliott is very good to me," broke in Claire naively.

Alexis cursed inwardly. Did she expect him to thank the man for taking her off his hands?

"It is Mrs. Petrovsky who has been good," retorted Elliott more gently.

"I shouldn't place the guilt entirely upon her shoulders!" laughed Mme. Petrovsky with a kittenish air. "I have often feared that Dr. Elliott in his kindness of heart, must be neglecting his work. I assure you he and Claire have been inseparable all winter."

Dr. Elliott glared. "I'm afraid you are exaggerating. But Mrs. Petrovsky's occasional company has proved a great boon to a lonely chap like myself."

"Occasional!" exclaimed Mme. Petrovsky. "I should hardly call it that, dear Dr. Elliott!"

"It has seemed so to me."

"Ah, the young are so impetuous!" She raised innocent eyes to the ceiling. "They are never contented with less than all."

"You choose to be playful," said the doctor, with a guarded little smile.

Alexis admired the man's restraint. He, himself, fidgeted uneasily. Did his mother have no decency at all?

"Aren't we getting rather serious?" he demanded. What a ghastly scene! Why couldn't the fellow go home? Perhaps he was in love with Claire, after all?

"It's a serious subject." Mme. Petrovsky was still sprightly. "Repressed desires are almost as serious as unrepressed."

The doctor laughed. "Ah, now you are getting on familiar ground. When it comes to Freud, or his fellow Paul Prys," his eye gleamed dangerously, "I can argue with the best of you."

Mme. Petrovsky nodded gayly. "Do you follow the new method of free expression?"

"I believe that one's desires, if decent, should be gratified." He fixed his eyes upon Claire's face with an expression at once baffling and affectionate.

Mme. Petrovsky bridled. "There are so many standards of decency, aren't there? And that of a young doctor might be considered lax by an old foggy like myself."

Alexis shot her a tortured glance. "Since when have you become so interested in Psycho-Analysis? This is getting too high-brow for Claire and me, isn't it, Claire?"

She met his harried gaze with an apologetic smile at once pleading and listless. "I'm afraid I wasn't paying much attention."

Mme. Petrovsky turned towards her punctiliously. Her eyes beneath the smile seemed to strip the girl to the bone, and Claire cowered away as from a limelight. "You had better listen, dear child. For the matter concerns you profoundly."

"Concerns me?" she muttered inexplicably uneasy.

"Yes, indeed," playfully. "We're talking about the doctor's repressed and unrepressed desires."

"What have I to do with them?" Her voice was cold with dawning fear.

"We are trying to discover in which of the two pigeon-holes you belong."

"Ah!" Claire's pale lips parted on a cry. She half rose from her chair. Alexis sprang across the room to her side.

"This is too much!" he exclaimed. "Why do you torture the child?"

"Because Mme. Petrovsky wants me to confess that I love Claire!" Dr. Elliott's tones rang clear.

They all looked at him in amazement. A calm exultation in his eyes, he faced them squarely.

"Can you deny it?" A smile of triumph played about the older woman's mouth.

"I can. But I will not!"

Claire hid her face in shaking hands. "Oh, Robert," she sobbed, "please don't."

He approached and stood over her with quiet strength.

"Why should I deny the most beautiful thing in my life? That would be to lower it to the level of Mme. Petrovsky's insinuations."

The latter started up from her chair with a cry of suppressed fury. The baby-blue orbs flashed hell-fire.

"You—you——!" she commenced. Then turned to Alexis with a resumption of her habitual sweetness. "What did I tell you? Was I not right?"

"Keep quiet," he commanded. "You have made trouble enough for one evening!" He turned to Dr. Elliott. "So you are in love with my wife?"

The other man looked down upon him from his greater height. "I have done you no wrong, Petrovsky."

Claire raised a white and streaming face.

"Oh Alexis, you do believe him, don't you?"

He patted her trembling hand, with absent-minded kindness. "Don't worry, child. Of course I believe him."

Robert Elliott grasped him by the shoulder. "You are a real man, Petrovsky. I didn't know you had it in you!" he exclaimed naïvely.

Alexis' smile was a trifle awry. "You are wrong, Elliott. If I were a real man, all this would never have occurred."

His mother interposed herself between them almost savagely.

"All this magnanimity looks very pretty. But what proof have you that they are not lying? I, for one, don't believe in this blessed innocence. Many a divorce has been granted on less substantial grounds than these!"

Claire stumbled to her feet, and stood swaying against the table.

"You are a wicked woman! How dare you lie about me and Dr. Elliott? I shall not stay under the same roof with you for another night!" She moved blindly forward towards the corridor. Alexis pursued her.

"Where are you going? What are you going to do?"

She turned upon him like a hounded creature. "Let me alone, I am going to pack," she cried at bay. "I am going to pack," she repeated wildly. She stumbled down the corridor towards her room.

Mme. Petrovsky reseated herself. "Running away is hardly the action of an innocent woman!" she remarked.

"Be silent!" exclaimed Elliott sternly. But he was too late for Claire had heard.

"Oh!" With a gasping cry she faced them. Then crashed forward like a felled tree.

"You have killed her!" Alexis ran down the corridor, and knelt beside the small, prostrate figure. He was about to lift it in his arms when the doctor interfered.

"Put her down on her back. Here, let me do it." He shifted Claire expertly. "Don't you know that a fainting patient must never be lifted? It sometimes kills them, especially in her condition."

"In her condition?" Alexis looked up from rubbing Claire's hands. "What do you mean? Is her heart affected?"

Squatting upon his haunches the doctor uncorked his brandy flask. As he leaned over to pour the liquid between Claire's teeth, he looked Alexis squarely in the eyes.

"Your wife is pregnant," he said shortly. "It is time you knew it."

An ashy pallor overspread Alexis' face. His heart leaped sickeningly. Then tolled against his ribs like a knell. It tolled so raspingly—it tolled so loudly that all the world—that Anne herself must hear it.

"Why didn't you let me know?" he demanded softly. Was he never to cease paying for the feeble nightmare which had made Claire his? "Why was I not told?" he repeated with the same irate quiet.

Robert Elliott looked at him with grudging compassion. So the fellow could feel after all? Well, it was time he did! A throb of hatred seared him. "She did not wish to have you know. It was a matter of pride. She had no use for your pity, she only wanted you——" he hesitated over the word, "your love."

Before the suffering in the man's eyes, Alexis lowered his own. They fell upon the pinched features of the swooning girl.

"She is coming to," he whispered, between dry lips.

Like folded pansies, the dark eyes slowly unfurled. Into their shadowed depths Alexis plunged his agony and his shame. "Claire, what have I done to you?" he groaned.

The pansies opened wide. Terror crept into their wounded depths. The pale lips twisted.

"You have told him?" She looked up at Robert Elliott reproachfully.

He nodded. "Yes." His voice died into a hoarse murmur.

"How dared you when I'd forbidden it?" she cried weakly. Great tears slid down the hollow cheeks. She suddenly burst into uncontrollable, frenzied sobs that shook the feeble body.

Fear gripped Alexis as he watched her writhe in a vain effort to control herself.

"Don't, dear Claire," he cried, touching with clumsy fingers a lock of hair which clung against the drenched cheek.

"I wanted to spare you this," she gasped, raising drowned eyes to his.

A flood of shame swept over Alexis, together with an unbearable, wrenching pity. Pity for the suffering he had inflicted. Shame for the unheeded seed sowed so wantonly and without love. Despair that his heart should be empty of all save compassion. Futile, shameful anger against Claire that it was she, the unloved, and not Anne, who was to mother his first-born. Face drawn and gray, he bent over Claire in an agony of contrition.

"Don't, Claire, don't. You will hurt yourself!" He looked up at the doctor, who had risen and was trying to appear unconscious of a scene which was literally tearing at his very marrow. "Hadn't we better carry her into her room and put her to bed, Elliott?"

The power of speech had deserted Elliott. He nodded. They were about to gather her up in their arms, but Claire pushed them away, almost with violence.

"No, I will not stop here another night, with Aunt. I couldn't bear it!"

Alexis shot a desperate look at the other man, who shook his head gravely. "She had better be humored," he said decisively.

Claire's sobs grew fainter. She looked up at Dr. Elliott gratefully.

Alexis forced himself to a bitter decision. "How would you like to go to my apartment in Gramercy Park?" he asked with dreadful reluctance.

Surprise choked back Claire's sobs. "Do you mean it? Wouldn't I be awfully in your way?"

"Of course not. There is a day-bed in the studio where I can sleep. I have often used it."

That was true enough. A burning mist clouded his eyes. He turned away to conceal it. With what memories of Anne was the alcove not hallowed?

Eyes upon his averted face, Claire's lips quivered. "Have you given up your house in Long Island?"

He avoided her glance with a sense of pity. "I still have it until the first of April. However, I always sleep in town on concert days, and very often at other times. But you needn't worry about being a nuisance, for I am leaving on tour the day after to-morrow."

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten." Claire's voice sounded dreary. "There was something in the paper about it. If you will help me up, I think I'll go and dress."

Their arms beneath hers, she struggled to her feet.

"Do you feel able to dress?" asked Elliott as she swayed a little. "Why do you hurry?"

"Yes, oh yes," she pushed the hair back from her damp brow. "I must go at once."

She walked slowly towards her bedroom. The clumsy gait, the fragile, swollen body struck Alexis for the first time. Filled with compassion and a sick sort of repulsion of which he was fiercely ashamed, he turned to Dr. Elliott.

"Will you please see that Claire has a nurse? A nice, cheerful one. I don't want her to be lonely. There is a cleaning woman who comes in by the day who will cook for them until we can procure some one better."

"I'll telephone for one." Elliott shot a glance charged with meaning after the tragic figure retreating up the hall. "For God's sake be kind to her, Petrovsky!" He whispered huskily, as Claire's door closed behind her.

Alexis passed a hand over his trembling mouth. "I'll try to, God knows! But you ought to have married her, Elliott. You could have made her happy!" he replied with aching humility.

They walked slowly back to the living room.

Elliott slipped into the ante-room to telephone. As he waited for his number there was a stoic, Indian savagery about his face. Wild, unbidden thoughts rose like green scum to the clear surface of his mind. If Claire's child should die, all might yet be well. The last link between her and Alexis sundered, she might possibly be induced to give him up forever. But if—it lived—! With a knowing leer, temptation nudged his elbow, puffing its vile breath into his clean nostrils. He shook the beast off angrily and responded to the operator's voice when it came with detached calm.

Meanwhile, Alexis had flung himself into a chair beside the living-room table, burying his face upon its surface. For him the radiant dream was over. He had awakened to the same grim and joyless world which had once before tried to slay him.

Mme. Petrovsky had come out from her room at the sound of their return. She approached Alexis stealthily. Her bulk cast a bloated shadow on the wall. It crouched over him like a beast of prey. "So you have let yourself be conquered by a nobody, an unloved waif? Fie, you are weak! You are allowing yourself to be dragged into a mediocrity more loathsome than death. That is not for you. You are a genius. Spread your wings, fly away before you lose all capacity to soar. Fly away! Your bird of paradise awaits you. Do such as you mate with the sparrows?"

His mother's words, or his own subconscious mind? What matter? It voiced his weeping soul.

SACRIFICIAL

The city was muffled in fog. It brooded over Fifth Avenue, oozing rain like an enormous sponge. Beneath its clammy drip, dirty snow melted into unwholesome puddles, street lamps haloed goldenly. It was after midnight and the broad, deserted pavement glistened like some dark river upon which a few rare craft slid by in ghostly procession. Occasional passers-by, beneath outspreading umbrellas, looked strangely fungoid. Their breath issuing in small clouds, seemed to congeal and solidify upon reaching the air as if the fog itself were composed of the warm emanations of mankind. Alexis hurried drearily up the avenue. With Claire safely installed in the apartment and companioned by a nurse, there was nothing further for him to do. He was free momentarily. Free to savor to the full the bitterness of the cup he had set to his lips. But the evening had left him numb as well as distraught. He was conscious only of an overmastering impulse to rush out into the streets, to drown identity in fog, lose self in some demoniac outburst.

Huge gulps of the chill air in his lungs, he staggered forward as if propelled by a monster wind, eyes fixed in front of him, burning a path through the drizzling mist. An empty taxi glided close to the curb. He hailed it mechanically and gave the man Anne's address. A moment later they had joined the current on the black and glistening river.

Of course, he would not disturb Anne. That would be sheer cruelty. But he must be near to her somehow. That was an exquisite torture which he was too weak to forego. Once there, he would dismiss his taxi and hug close to the wall which sheltered her. After that he had no plans. The future was not more dark nor indefinite than the immediate night before him. There was only one thing certain in his mind. He could not return to Gramercy Park. That was a grinning horror which his embryonic Quixotry was too feeble to face.

A rapid transit up the avenue brought them to the shrouded park. They skirted its graveyard shore to the Seventies, and then swerved into Anne's street. As they neared the house Alexis smothered a cry of irritation. The façade was brilliant with lights. It shone luminous through the fog like the golden exit from a tunnel.

Of course, how foolish to have forgotten! This was Anne's night at the opera, and she was having some people in afterwards. He had been invited to join them but had refused as usual. The hilarious horde was his particular abomination, and it was seldom that Anne could persuade him into one of these parties. She did not try very hard, for as the season progressed she herself had become utterly wearied with it all. It was only fear of appearing both snobbish and unkind which prevented her from breaking away altogether. And Alexis knew his presence made it more difficult. The malice of Ellen, who could not forgive Anne for not confiding in her, the jealousy of Gerald, created a tension. So, although always invited, Alexis' absence had evolved into a kind of unwritten law.

But to-night was different. A desperate night, created for the breaking of all rules. A frantic, lawless night, lying between the boundaries of time like a savage bandit-ridden tract, dividing two civilized states. To-night all forms of excitement were unabhorrant, even the ribald efforts of the horde. At any rate, their presence would afford an opportunity to see Anne, to be near her, to breathe in the beloved atmosphere while she still remained unconscious of the barrier which had fallen between them forever.

Fever surging in his veins, Alexis dismissed his taxi.

Inside the house, there was the usual uproar of music and dancing. Unperceived for the moment, Alexis stood upon the threshold of the huge living room. His eyes flashed through the swirling couples, searching for Anne. But she was not upon the floor. Seated at the Steinway, Gerald was playing with delicate ferocity. His young, almost beautiful face, glowered cynically as he glanced at the dancers. Grotesque syncopations dripped from his swooping fingertips.

Alexis started to wedge his way to the other end of the room. The eyes of the two men met with a shock. A smile distorted Gerald's lips. The music ceased almost discordantly. Everybody stopped dancing. For a moment the world stood still.

"Look who's here!"

In a flame-colored chiffon frock, Olive Fay darted up to Alexis.

"Please dance with me, Mr. Petrovsky?"

"Of course, that's what I came for!" His hard gaze hovered over her naked young shoulders. "But first, where is my hostess?"

She pouted. "How old-fashioned of you to remember your hostess! But come along, Old Ironsides, if you must."

The dancing had recommenced. They dashed through revolving couples to the sofa in front of the fire, where Anne was sitting with a large, dark man, whom Alexis recognized as Del Re, the South American opera singer. In a dream-like dance dress of sapphire tulle over pale-green chiffon, the emerald pendant upon her breast, Anne watched their approach with concealed astonishment. So Alexis had come after all! Why? The brilliant eyes, the twisted smile puzzled her. Had he been listening to some rumor about Del Re? Was the old serpent of jealousy once more coiling to strike her long-suffering head?

"How nice of you to change your mind!" she murmured, a question beneath her composure, "Have you met Señor Del Re? Mr. Petrovsky?"

The familiar pang gnawing at his vitals, Alexis suppressed it savagely. "Who does not know the celebrated Mephisto? You have given me many a thrill, Señor."

"Is there a thrill left in New York?" Del Re's crooked eyebrow curved whimsically. "I thought they were all in your violin, Petrovsky! Thrills? You are the master there!" There was genuine admiration in the cello-like tones.

"Yes, isn't he wonderful?" shrieked Olive. "I am going to dance with him this very minute. I've simply got to be seen in his company, that's all!"

"Very flattering, isn't she!" Flashing a blazing glance into Anne's face, Alexis laughed loudly, then turned to Olive. "Did you bring your press-agent along?"

"Mean thing!" She dragged him on to the floor with another shrill squeal. They danced away. Her mocking eyes on his face, she cackled gayly.

"No use in looking at Anne like that, Mr. Petrovsky. Might as well make up your mind to lose her. He can get 'em whenever he wants to."

Dragging his eyes from Anne's face, Alexis hid his crimson anger like a wound. "He has a record, has he?" He crushed Olive to him savagely.

"Oh yes," she gasped, mistaking his clasp for ardor. "And what he hasn't been through! Thrust in the stomach with bayonets. Scarred with shrapnel. Face lifted at least twice. You know they say he is almost seventy. But what with Steinach and surgery, you'd never dream it, would you?"

"Never!" They circled the room in abandoned unison. As they reached the sofa again, Alexis rudely relaxed his hold and sank into the couch upon the other side of Anne. With a chagrined laugh, Olive fell into a chair next to Del Re.

"He doesn't seem to appreciate me, does he?"

"Will you dance with me?" Alexis whispered into Anne's ear.

"Of course!" She did not know Alexis in this reckless, Byronical mood. Could he have had a little too much to drink? She watched him down the whisky and soda just passed by the footman.

Alexis caught her troubled glance. He nodded gayly. "It's all right. Don't be frightened. I'm not drunk with anything except you. You are *crème de Menthe* in a dark-blue glass, and very intoxicating." He pointed to the green lining of the sapphire gown.

Laughingly, they started to dance. Almost of equal height, faces on a level, their breath mingled in a single stream. Their bodies swayed to the rhythmic breeze of a waltz. Radio music this time. Dance orchestra from the Drake Hotel, Chicago. And although unromantically canned, most peppy and enticing; vitamins intact. As she and Alexis swung by Ellen, Anne caught her amused smile. Sitting between Gerald, who was smoking furiously, and Caldenas, doing nothing at all in his usual cherubic fashion, she appeared serenely malicious, like some complaisant goddess of the senses.

Anne shivered and drew closer to Alexis. His clasp tightened tempestuously about the slim, ungirdled body. He danced her out into the hall. Swooping into a remote corner, he stopped abruptly, and pressed his lips upon hers. The Sparkling eyes were so close that she felt as if she were being sucked into the expanded pupils, as into a bottomless whirlpool. She went pale and a little giddy.

"What is the matter with you to-night, Alexis?" she whispered as they started to dance again.

His lashes swept her forehead like a caress. He did not reply but continued to look into her eyes with the same disturbing gaze. Holding her as in a vise, their limbs interlocked, merged, in rapturous fusion. Stabbing weakness pierced Anne.

"Don't," she supplicated faintly.

Muffled against her hair, his laugh rumbled dizzily through her head. His lips brushed her cheek, mumbling softly at the pink lobe of her ear.

"I don't think I like you to-night!" Her whisper was breathless.

The sardonic laughter was repeated. The eyes fixed upon hers flared hotly. Anne was afraid. As they whirled giddily back into the noisy room, she welcomed with relief the announcement of supper.

They all trooped into the dining room and seated themselves as they pleased at small tables, which lent the vast room the festive air of a *récherché* little restaurant. Varicolored bowls of copper-hued tulips with glass candlesticks to match adorned each table, sounding a rich note against the gray tempera walls. Adroitly shed by Anne, Alexis discovered himself between a young Roumanian noblewoman, almost as beautiful as Queen Marie in her prime, and a well-known authoress, whose Savonarola profile stared austere beneath close-cropped hair. Opposite sat a young nondescript, one of those indispensable stop-gaps whose white shirt-fronts fill the social vacuum so perfectly.

The young countess was, according to the society column, decidedly vivacious. This was her first visit to the United States, and she was collecting scalps as well as impressions. Alexis' golden mane was not to be disdained. She courted him assiduously all through supper and he made contemptuously free response. The honey-colored hair, the sweet-scented body intrigued him very little. He knew that he could have her with a single gesture from his famous fingers. He had met her kind before, a little less beautiful perhaps, certainly more blatant, but equally voracious of sensation. A liaison with Alexis Petrovsky or any other famous artist would furnish welcome tidbit for dainty jaws.

A hectic spot upon each cheek, he ate his supper in a sort of petrified excitement, scarcely aware of the audacious words his lips were uttering; absolutely ignorant of the food he put between them. He drank the sparkling wine feverishly. It spread through his body and was absorbed like spilled ink upon a blotter. Beyond the saturnine profile of the authoress, he occasionally caught Anne's eyes fixed upon him from a neighboring table. Beneath their serene surface he glimpsed a troubled question. Was she, too, suffering? Did she sense his pain? His unutterable, stupefying torture? Or did she merely find him volatile and unstable? Well, she would understand it all soon enough, God knows!

What a nightmare!

Supper over, the crowd overflowed into the living room. Seated at the piano, Del Re was preparing to sing. Her hand upon his arm, his beautiful neighbor lured Alexis into a remote window-seat.

"Now, we can listen in comfort," she murmured, approaching feline. Her bare flesh grazed his shoulder. He lighted his cigarette from hers, leaning unnecessarily close. It amused him to whet her genteel nymphomania.

Del Re sang an aria from Mephisto with diabolic grandeur. Then broke into a series of Spanish folk songs. The vibrating, cello-like tones, the lilting accompaniment, were replete with magnetism and created a furor. Close upon his triumphant heels, followed Olive Fay, who executed a kicking dance to Gerald's devilishly clever improvisation. Rosy, rouged knees emerging impudently from slit draperies, she was the incarnation of Gerald's heady and insinuating jazz.

There was an unsteady silence, a self-conscious, tightened silence. Lips parted feverishly, the wine-warmed crowd was momentarily uneasy. Then it relaxed into uproarious applause. Olive was lost amongst a bevy of shirt-fronts as indispensable to her being as lipstick or rouge, and about as impersonal.

Later, they called upon Alexis. He came out from his corner smiling and unexpectedly amiable. To Anne's surprise, he consented to contribute to the entertainment.

"But you haven't your violin!"

"I don't need it," he replied, laughing lightly. "I intend to be low-brow."

Running his fingers over the piano keys, he clashed into a disturbing medley, Chopin, Stravinsky, Mendelssohn and Sowerby, Ornstein and Tchaikowsky, with a dash of MacDowell as leaven. The audience howled approbation. "What do you call it?"

He looked up demurely from the keys. "The Petrovsky Blues!"

He broke into a revised version of the popular negro melody, transforming its plaintive simplicity into symphonic proportions. Then with a swift transition, he began to ragtime an old Italian opera. With a broad smile, Del Re strode to the piano and sang an accompaniment, in the nasal drone of the cabaret favorite. Negroid and scintillating, the parody ceased upon a plaintive chord, reminiscent of some southern spiritual.

Listeners crowded about the piano, jaded senses stirred to the shallow depths. From the background, Anne watched in fascinated silence. She did not dream Alexis had it in him, and as she looked at the flushed face an undercurrent of apprehension flowed like an icy stream below the surface of her pleasure. What could have excited him so to-night that he had ventured forth from his shell with such uncharacteristic fireworks? At Anne's elbow, Caldenas grunted appreciatively. He was putting the last touches to a caricature of the two celebrities at the piano, which, as he quaintly put it, would immortalize their genius as well as his own.

The little Roumanian leaned over Alexis. Her perfume weighed on his irritated nerves, nauseatingly heavy. "When are you coming to see me?"

He laughed loudly. His eyes stripped her. "Never!"

She flushed and bit her naturally red lips.

"You are detestable. I am mad about you," she whispered.

"You are maddeningly pretty, but I am immune," he retorted, smiling up into the flower-like face with curved, saturnine lips.

She rested her hand upon the keyboard next to his.

"Your music makes me feel positively wanton!" The blue eyes swam amorously.

He flung her hand away, with casual fingers. His glance rent her unmercifully. "You are wasting your time!"

She crumbled as if struck by lightning. Tears of mortification rose to the lovely eyes. She stammered in utter rout, "You are a fiend!"

He rose from the piano and looked about him smilingly. "The end of a perfect day," he remarked in a loud voice. He shook hands with Del Re and retreated towards Anne.

With meaning looks the group began to break up. Their guard of honor ranged about them, Ellen and Olive flitted away to the accompaniment of knowing smiles. An obscure and taciturn husband was claimed by the authoress and led triumphantly home.

The countess, a little pale, accepted the escort of Gerald and Caldenas.

Alexis waited flagrantly, while Del Re completed ceremonious adieus.

As the door closed upon them all, Anne turned towards Alexis with an inquiring, slightly apprehensive air. "Are you going to stay, Alexis? It is very late."

For response he drew her to him in an abrupt convulsive gesture. Leading her to the sofa, he knelt and buried his head on her lap. She brushed the hair back from his forehead nervously. It was indiscreet of him to have remained after the others had gone. She had caught interchanged glances and knew that the worst interpretation would be made of the situation. As he remained motionless, she spoke a little wearily.

"What is the matter, dear? Why are you so excited to-night?"

He raised a bloodless face, and she saw that his eyes were swimming in tears.

"Oh Anne, it is all over. This is the end."

With a smothered sob, he dropped his head back upon her knees.

"What do you mean?" Her voice was shocked. A premonitory thrill sent a shiver over her body.

"I have taken Claire back again," he gasped.

She uttered a cry and recoiled instinctively.

"I understand and—and I suppose I am glad," she faltered, with quick pride. She tried to remove his hold but his arms tightened about her convulsively.

"Oh no, you don't understand at all. I don't love her. It isn't that. It's——" his eyes widened with horror, "Claire is going to have a child," he finished brokenly.

"Ah!" Anne's face became suddenly ashen. "I suppose I should have foreseen this," she murmured, pushing him away from her almost roughly. "Oh, poor Claire, how she must have suffered! How can I ever forgive myself?" She wrung her hands in an unfamiliar gesture.

He stumbled to his feet and stood over her. "I didn't know it, Anne. I never dreamed of such a thing."

"No, I suppose not, but that doesn't make it any easier for Claire, does it?" Her voice was dry and expressionless. "When—when is it to be?"

He shot her a tortured glance.

"Very soon, I am afraid." He averted his working face. "Oh Anne, don't despise me. I was mad, beside myself when it all happened. It is blurred, fantastic, like the memory of some confused dream."

His miserable voice pierced Anne's pride. She put her arms about him and drew him down on to the couch beside her. "Poor Alexis, my poor, poor boy," she crooned sorrowfully.

He hid his face against the back of the sofa. "I am cursed, I seem to blast all those who love me," he

choked. "Oh, Anne, if you had seen her pitiful little face! I am not fit to live!"

"Hush, it is terrible for her, of course. But it was not your fault. You were horribly unfortunate, that is all." She stroked his shoulder, all the aching tenderness of her heart in her finger-tips. "And now you are going to make it all up to her."

He returned her look with dumb, suffering eyes. "How the gods must hate me!"

A little shudder ran through her. What was the adage? "Whom the gods destroy, they first make mad"? She placed her hand upon his lips. "Don't say that. I can't bear to hear you. Nobody hates you, least of all the gods. It is only that you are not as other men. Suffering seems to be the price exacted of genius."

"I wish I were a clerk, tied to a desk in some rich man's office. I might have had some chance at happiness then!"

She shook her head pityingly. "Oh no, that would never do. That life would kill you. Your wings are powerful. You must soar higher than the rest of us, even if it means aching loneliness and solitude."

His mother's words on Anne's lips! There must be truth in them, indeed! He uttered a sorrowful cry. "Oh Anne, I simply cannot believe that this is the end. Tell me, must it be so?"

She nodded. Great tears coursed down her face. "Yes Alexis, this is the end. You must stand by Claire now. I shall love you more than ever for doing it."

"It will kill me to part from you." He pressed a tear-wet cheek against hers. For an anguished moment, they rocked to and fro in silent grief.

She spoke at last, in a weak little voice, unlike her own. "Better perhaps that we should part while we still love each other. Then—then we shall always remember it so."

A bitter-sweet smile twisted his lips. "Were you afraid my love would get tepid? You were mistaken. If I didn't love you so consumingly, I couldn't part with you now. If this were only passion," his voice broke, "I might have been tempted to let things drift as they were until, until you discovered."

A beautiful look of comprehension crossed her face. She pressed Alexis' head to her bosom in a passion of tenderness. "You are more noble than I dreamed."

He groaned. "Not noble at all, only suffering, Anne."

"Tell me what you intend to do? Of course you will go on your tour?"

"Don't ask me, I hardly know as yet, what I shall do on my return. I will make the best arrangements for Claire that I can. But I will never live with her as my wife, and perhaps not even under the same roof."

"Poor Alexis, poor boy," Anne felt him shudder as he lay against her.

"Does it hurt you to say good-by?" The whisper was dragged from the anguish in his heart.

A lump in her throat, she clasped him to her without a word, and their lips met and clung in sorrowful communion.

He bent over her and touched the emerald pendant about her throat. "Keep it always in memory of me," he whispered. "Promise?"

She nodded. A rending pain, as of disruption racked her to the bone. "I promise." Her voice broke. She turned away and flung herself face downwards on to the pillows. "Go, please go, I cannot bear any more."

He stumbled to his feet and looked down upon her for the final time, a lingering look, as if he were trying to quench the thirst of the years to come in one consuming glance.

"Good-by, my very, my only dearest. Try to forgive me if you can. Remember that I love you, and always shall love you to the very end."

Then he went away.

The door closed behind him with a soft, insistent finality that resounded against Anne's heart like the first clod of earth upon a beloved coffin. She suddenly felt old and inexpressibly weary, as if he had taken her youth away with him forever. She broke into a fit of passionate weeping.

"WILL YOU TAKE ME—"

Spring had taken possession of Florence. Its glamour, its dewy freshness, lay over all. The pregnant earth intoxicated with incense of new-born life.

On the hillside, Anne's garden was abloom. Hyacinths and lilies, daffodils, jonquils and pansies, bordered the graveled paths. Morning-glories crept along the rose-tinted walls. In intricate designs, orderly brigades of tulips, flung heavenwards their gorgeous cups. Lilac bushes showered fragrance from all sides. The fountain, silent all winter, gushed forth in renewed lilt. In its center, a marble cupid, scarred and darkened with years, dimpled, perennially roguish.

On the raised terrace, overlooking the valley, Anne was pouring tea for Vittorio's mother. *Petite, grande dame*, the short snow-white hair curling tightly all over her head, the Marchesa looked like an Eighteenth Century porcelain. About the delicately wrinkled old throat coiled a necklace of pearls as large and round as peas. A Chinese shawl, youthfully gay and exotic, draped the frail shoulders. She was talking, as usual, with great animation.

A little pale in her yellow crêpe gown, Anne leaned back in the Manila chair and listened. A subdued, rather weary, little smile played about her lips. The old lady stopped her chatter and scanned Anne's face affectionately. The large black eyes were very bright and uncannily piercing.

"What is the matter, Anne? You aren't a bit like yourself this spring. You seem a little fagged. Are you sure that everything is right with you, dear child?"

Anne's smile brightened. "*Cara Marchesa*, of course I'm all right. Why shouldn't I be? Am I not always happy to get back to my beloved Florence?"

The Marchesa laughed happily, like a reassured child.

"You do love it, don't you? You are a true daughter of the Lily like myself. Just think, Anne, I haven't been back to America for almost forty years. And after Vittorio's hectic description of New York, I have no desire to go."

"What a naughty lady," Anne laughed. "An unpatriotic little fraud! Nobody would dream you were an old New Yorker, yourself, before your marriage."

"No," the Marchesa smiled complacently. "They tell me I am thoroughly Italianized. Frankly, the new America would kill me."

Anne laughed again. The Marchesa's little affectation was rather endearing. "I believe it would, Marchesa. You belong in a garden like this, against a background of Tuscan hills." She waved her hand towards the terraced hillsides.

The Marchesa nodded, pleased at the delicate compliment.

"But Vittorio really likes New York, that is, some aspects of it," she said courteously.

Anne shook her head with a dry little laugh. "Don't try to spare my feelings. He hated it. He was horribly bored with us all."

The Marchesa's eyes twinkled. She shook a coquettish finger slightly crooked from rheumatism in Anne's face.

"Not bored with you, my dear. You cannot make me believe that. You are the apple of his eye."

Anne helped herself hastily to a buttered scone. "I'm afraid the apple stuck in his throat more than once," she murmured with a nervous laugh.

The old woman looked at her wistfully. No, certainly, Anne was not herself. What could be the matter? Some love affair, perhaps?

"When are you going to make us both happy?" The old voice was very gentle.

"Do you still want me?" With averted head Anne fingered the teacups.

"More than ever, sweet child! I cannot bear to think of poor Vittorio spending the rest of his life pottering about musty old ruins. And that is what he will do if you won't have him, my dear. He refuses to look at any one else!"

"But he loves ruins, doesn't he?" Anne teased, her equanimity somewhat restored.

The Marchesa laughed ruefully. "Yes, he seems to have an inextinguishable fondness for antiques, including his mother."

"Perhaps then, if I wait a little longer, I shall acquire more value in his eyes, become more mellow, you know."

"Wicked child! You speak of yourself as if you were a cheese!"

"Speaking of cheese, that reminds me. I golfed with the Principe this morning. You know he is in very bad odor here at present? I felt quite devilish being seen with him."

"Some new scandal?" The black eyes twinkled.

Anne shrugged. "A cinema actress, I believe." She lighted a cigarette and puffed at it delicately. "He had the temerity to propose to me again."

The Marchesa's foot tapped upon the bricks. "Impoverished old wretch! I can't bear to have you exposed to such things, Anne. Why don't you marry us, and protect yourself against these adventurers?"

Secure in her own immense fortune, the Marchesa serenely felt her son to be above suspicion.

Anne pretended to be immensely shocked. "The idea of calling the Principe an adventurer. Why, his one foot in the grave would break off if he could hear you. He is count of this, marchese of that," she flicked her ashes flippantly, "and a Spanish Grandee to boot. I ought to know, he has enumerated his titles to me often enough."

The Marchesa cackled merrily. "I suggest his getting out a catalogue for the benefit of American heiresses. Old braggart! Why doesn't he ask me? I'm nearer his age!"

"He is going to invite you to his tennis tea on Sunday," giggled Anne. "Perhaps you can catch him on the rebound."

"Never say die! If I can't have a daughter-in-law, I might as well get me a husband!" The Marchesa rose to her feet rheumatically. "But I must limp along now dear. The sun is beginning to sink behind the *Duomo* and my old bones will creak if I linger."

Anne moved towards her quickly. "I hate to have you go, dear lady."

Arm in arm, they strolled towards the balustrade and leaned there silently. Dotted with occasional villas, the terraced hillsides glowed russet. Dusky cypresses towered beside stone walls. Olive trees, in gray-green uniforms elbowed gayly-blossoming fruit trees, "Like soldiers out with their sweethearts," murmured Anne. "How Florence grows upon one. What a personality she has! There is something chaste and virginal about her, which is strange when you consider her history. She is as unlike Rome or Venice as Botticelli is different from Michael Angelo and Titian. But I put it so badly!"

"I see what you mean," broke in the Marchesa. "Florence will always be pre-Raphaelite. She is the Blonde Princess, while Rome and Venice—" she hesitated.

"Are the wicked brunettes—the red-haired villainesses like myself," finished Anne with a laugh. "But it is beautiful. I never get tired of the *Duomo*, especially from this distance, do you? Near to, it resembles a mah jong set a little too closely to suit me in flippant moods."

"Blasphemer!"

In spite of the rheumatism, they lingered while the setting sun cast a ruddy glow over roofs and buildings and stained the Arno pink, as it crawled beneath its bridges, and here and there a window gleamed rose-colored. The crimson dome of the cathedral resembled a mammoth ruby, its columnar *campanile* soaring ethereally beside it.

Still arm in arm, the two women sauntered away from the scene regretfully, and descended the short flight of steps into the garden.

"What are you doing with yourself to-night?" asked Anne as they strolled down one of the graveled paths.

"I'm looking forward to a perfect evening, child. Dinner by the fire in the *saloto*, the companionship of Saint Simon, unexpurgated. And you?"

Anne sighed. "Nothing. I refused a bridge. I wasn't in the mood."

Her sad face fretted the old Marchesa. What ailed the girl? She certainly must be love-sick. Had Vittorio lost out after all? Her son, she shrewdly suspected, was remaining in Sicily at Anne's request, for she had never known him to miss a Florentine spring before. About to invite Anne to join forces for the evening, she changed her mind abruptly. If the child wished to work out her problem in solitude, she herself ought to be the last to prevent her, especially if some good should come out of it for Vittorio.

They continued in silence to the end of the garden, where a postern gate in the pink-tinted wall opened on to the Torrigiani property. As the *Marchesa* passed through she turned and gazed up into the other's face. Tall and slim as a jonquil in her yellow crêpe dress, Anne's hair flamed in the setting sun. The old woman's eyes looked troubled as they rested upon it.

"My dear, how beautiful you are! I love to look at you! If I were the typical old lady I'd be telling what a beauty I was myself in my palmy days. I don't seem to know my cues at all. But as a matter of fact, I'm a better looking ruin than I ever was girl! If I were more wily, too, and less wise, I probably wouldn't urge you quite so heartily, to marry my only son. For there is danger in your beauty, child. But years have taught me to appreciate danger. And I couldn't be so unkind as to deprive a son of mine of such a precious stimulant."

With an enigmatic smile she raised herself on tiptoe and pecked daintily at Anne's chin. The younger woman gathered her impulsively into her arms and squeezed her.

"You delicious old cynic! No wonder Vittorio adores you. I do myself!"

A wistful expression crossed the delicate old face. "Be good to us, my dear," she whispered. "We need you terribly in our house." She turned gayly-shawled shoulders, and trotted up the long avenue towards her villa.

Anne gazed after the small figure affectionately. Her absent eyes swept the familiar gardens whose famous boxwood hedges defined the paths with fantastic precision. Here a strange, antediluvian beast, there a gigantic globe, so that to the bird's-eye view the gardens appeared like an enormous chessboard with pawns at play. In the distance, from behind a mass of towering cypresses, gleamed the villa, its splendid façade flanked by a long flight of marble steps.

Anne closed the gate and walked back through her own simple garden. She was anxious to reach the terrace again before all vestige of the sunset should have disappeared, and she mounted the steps with rapid feet. A cape over her shoulders, she drew a chair up by the balustrade and sat there while the henna-colored hills darkened to purple, then faded into lavender, and a mist rolled up from the valley and curled about the city like a smoking halo. Pretty soon a few lights gradually emerged with the evanescent gleam of a flock of fireflies.

Fireflies! Anne's lips curled downward. She closed her eyes behind smarting tears. Soon would return the season of fireflies and roses. Would Vittorio be there to wander arm in arm as of old in the *Viale*, beneath a golden moon, while swarms of fireflies danced about them and the scent of roses and verbena ascended to the stars? Anne did not know. She had not been able to bring herself to the point of meeting him again, although she had written of her definite rupture with Alexis only a few weeks after it had taken place. But her heart was still sore from the uprooting, and the necessity for solitude was urgent as the primitive instinct of a wounded animal. So she had begged Vittorio to be patient a little while longer, to give her time to readjust herself to the old life. And he had been generous as usual, with an ecstatic undercurrent coursing beneath the sacrifice; a feeling as of crisis reached and nearly overcome; a premonition of future joys.

Anne had been quick to read this joy concealed between the lines of his letters. But she had not had either the desire or the heart to quench it. Her own unhappiness had made her heart very tender towards Vittorio and she was inexpressibly tired of struggling against the tide. Why not drift into haven at last? If she were good for nothing else, at least, she could make Vittorio happy. Alexis had taught her that, and much besides. No longer the inhibited creature of her first marriage, love and all

it implied, no longer repelled her. She had looked upon its naked beauty unashamed.

The first bitterness of parting over, she scarcely knew in what mood she found herself. A great lassitude had fallen upon her. A weariness almost mortal. Although she had realized from the beginning that rupture was inevitable, she had not looked for it so soon, and when the blow fell it stunned her. For days she had gone about her packing numbly, and it was not until after her arrival in Florence that she had been able to think about Alexis without tears, she to whom weeping was strange and almost monstrous.

And yet she had never really loved him as a woman loves a man upon whom she depends for her daily strength. He had been like a dearly loved, temperamental child. Torn from her arms, her tenderness was lost without him. Her heart yearned to mother his sorrow. At times her need of him was so desperate that she would have even welcomed a scene. To feel the eager arms about her, to look upon the beautiful, willful face, would have made up for all. However, in the darkest hour, when the void he had left ached most intolerably, Anne knew that their parting had all been for the best. Their chances of enduring happiness had been so infinitesimal compared to the odds against them. No, even now, hungry for love and solitary as never before, she could still face facts with a certain sturdy wisdom, a cynicism that amazed her, and of which she was even a trifle ashamed.

She found herself reading Vittorio's letters with a growing nostalgia for his comforting presence. His poise, his masculinity, appealed to her more than ever before. Weary of leaning upon herself, she longed to take refuge behind his strength. How soothing, how comfortable, his untemperamental simplicity, how genuinely lovable his personality. And besides those qualities for which her fatigue yearned, he possessed rare ability, brains, and a growing reputation that was rapidly making him an outstanding figure amongst his colleagues.

Anne rose from her chair by the balustrade and groped her way down into the garden. Yes, she mused, Vittorio was a remarkable man. He deserved a better woman than herself. She ought to be ashamed for having kept him waiting so long. She strolled towards the house, whose lighted windows flickered welcome from behind closed shutters. Should she write to Vittorio to come at once? Perhaps? How happy it would make the dear little Marchesa. Yes, she would write to him now, at once, before the mood passed.

With a resolute step she walked up to the terrace and entered the villa, going directly to her desk in the library.

It was perhaps an evasive little letter, after all, she thought, as she stamped and gave it to the *contadine's* boy to mail. But it would fetch Vittorio, of that she was sure. Allowing three or four days for it to reach him (it might just miss the boat from Naples) she ought to be able to count upon seeing him within ten days or perhaps even sooner. She went upstairs and with the help of Regina changed into a loose, peplum-like tea-gown. Supremely happy in her beloved Firenze, the woman chattered volubly and flew about the large, austere room, like a bright-eyed magpie. Amusement curved Anne's lips as she watched her. What boundless joy it would give Regina when she herself became a Marchesa.

Gleaming hair wound about her head like a copper helmet, amber draperies clinging to the long, slim body, she wended her way downstairs and into the dining room.

After dinner she sat before the fire in the library, whose crowded bookshelves gleamed like jewels in the light of the flames. A volume of memoirs upon her knees, she gazed into the blaze absently. About ten o'clock the gate-bell rang and she heard a car drive into the courtyard. Perhaps the Principe, or some young officer whom she was in the habit of meeting at the Tennis Club in the *Cascine*. Not in the mood for visitors, she rose and made for the stairs.

"Give my excuses, Sandro," she commenced, as the old butler appeared in the doorway.

But she was too late, for the visitor had followed close upon the man's heels. Decidedly annoyed, she turned and faced the intruder, a courteous smile upon her lips.

If Anne had been a frail woman, she might have fainted. As she was, she came nearer to it than ever in her life before. The color drained from her face. She stared with dilated eyes, as a slim, tall man traversed the distance between them in a few short strides.

"Anne, I have come back. Will you take me?"

Falling at her feet, Alexis encircled her knees with relentless young arms.

CLAIRE'S CHILD

Anne led Alexis into the library, and fell into a chair before the fire.

"What does this mean? Have you left Claire after all?" Her widened eyes stared at Alexis coldly. So all his good resolutions had meant just nothing? The weakling strain would out. She might have guessed it.

But his gaze met hers unflinchingly. "Claire is dead," he whispered. The words issued from pale lips almost inaudibly.

Hands pressed against the arms of her chair, Anne started up. Her rising scream was subdued to a whisper. "Claire dead!"

He nodded dumbly. Throwing himself into a chair, he cupped his face in trembling fingers. "Yes, Anne, Claire is dead. And I have killed her as surely as if I'd stuck a knife into her, or put poison into her food."

Anne's hands flew instinctly to her mouth to check a cry.

"What do you mean?" Was it possible that—?

His misery-laden eyes encountered the question in hers without comprehending its horrible significance.

"The child. My child," he replied with tragic simplicity.

"Ah!" Anne leaned her head against the chair-back. She closed her eyes while a species of lucid swoon swept over her. So Claire was dead. They had killed her between them. She and Alexis had killed a woman. For if Alexis was guilty, so was she. Was she not the indirect cause of the girl's misery? Might not Alexis have gone back to Claire if it had not been for herself? That was problematical and open to doubt, so her uncanny lucidity informed her. But the fact remained they had killed her between them. And yet the very first time that Anne had seen Claire she already bore within herself the seeds of death. Tragic germ of life, that contains death! Poor, poor Claire!

"Poor Claire," she moaned beneath her breath almost unconsciously. "And—the child?" she faltered, sturdily defiant of her fear.

"Lives."

"Thank God." Anne's face was suddenly wet with tears. "Tell me about it." From a gulf of despair, Anne's voice smote upon his misery.

"It was horrible. Her face, her poor little dead face! I cannot sleep at night for seeing it." He wrung tortured hands.

Anne shuddered. "Tell me about it," she whispered relentlessly.

He fixed his eyes upon her petrified face with a groan. "Oh, Anne, must I tell you everything? Can't I spare you anything at all?"

"Tell me everything. I can bear it if you can." Her pupils narrowed in an agony of pity, as they fell upon his white face.

He continued in a monotonous voice that muffled his suffering as a heavy mist conceals the lip of a chasm. "I was in Chicago when I received the telegram. I cancelled my engagements and rushed back to New York on the next train. But it was too late—Claire was dead." Head heavy on his chest, his lids drooped leadenly over a waxy face.

"Go on." Anne's voice was thick with tears.

"I went to the apartment. Dr. Elliott met me at the door. He was in his shirt-sleeves." His voice choked and he was silent for a moment. "You don't know Dr. Elliott, but he was Claire's friend as well as her doctor. He—he loved Claire."

Anne showed her astonishment. Was it possible that between them they had driven the child to such cheap consolation? He sensed her terror.

"No, Anne, Elliott was not Claire's lover. He merely loved her. He would have liked to marry her if she had been willing to divorce me."

"I see. Poor man!" Anne's lips grew paler.

Alexis continued in the same emotionless tones.

"Yes, poor wretch. He is a fine fellow, and would have made her happy if it hadn't been for me. So you understand, of course, how much he hates me, don't you?"

"Of course, it is only natural." Her voice was warm with pity.

Alexis glanced up at her with pathetic gratitude. "He met me at the door. He gave me one terrible look, a look that I shall never forget, and said, 'Your wife is dead.' I—I don't know exactly what I did, but I think I leaned against the wall and I must have looked odd, for he cried out, 'Christ, this is no time to faint, man. Your wife is dead, I tell you, and you've got to face it. It's your own neglect that has killed her!' Those are the very words he used. They are branded into my brain."

He stopped short with a moan. Anne uttered a cry of pity.

"Poor boy, how you have suffered! But go on, I must know it all. That is the only way I can help you."

Dark with pain and compassion, her eyes endowed him with renewed force.

"He told me horrors, Anne, but I deserved them all. He said there was no reason why it should not have been a normal birth, except that Claire had been so weakened by unhappiness that she simply didn't have the physical stamina to pull her through. And he added that she didn't want to live, that she felt all along that she wouldn't. That's why she refused to go to the hospital. She couldn't bear the thought of dying there. Anne, think of it. Think of poor Claire, knowing she was going to die, and planning for it like that. Isn't it too pitiful?"

"Yes, it is horrible," Anne whispered, "and that is probably what killed her. She was so sure she was going to die, that she made no effort to help herself."

"That is what Elliott said. There wasn't much he didn't say. When he had finished, he swept by me

and out of the house and I haven't seen him since, excepting—" he hesitated painfully, "at the funeral."

Anne winced. The funeral, how heartrending! She had never thought of that, somehow. But of course there had had to be one. She avoided his eyes that brimmed with knowledge of such horrors.

"I shall not speak of that." His voice fluted dangerously. "After Elliott left I—I almost ran away myself. But the nurse came into the hall and seemed to expect me to go in and see Claire. I didn't want to, Anne. It was the most difficult thing I ever did in my life. I somehow felt as if I hadn't the right to take advantage of her helplessness. But the nurse couldn't know that, of course, so I followed her into the room."

He paused and shaded his eyes with quivering fingers. "Anne, she was beautiful. She looked rested as she used to when we were children together. Her hair was braided in two plaits on either side of her face. On one of her tiny hands gleamed the wedding ring. After that first glimpse I couldn't take my eyes off it. It seemed so pathetic, somehow. So tragic to have her wear it to the very end—and after. It wrenched at my heart. I fell down by the bedside and cried. Afterwards," he faltered.

Anne prompted him tenderly. "Afterwards?"

"Afterwards, when I was in the hall again, the nurse asked me if I didn't want to see the child. I—I had forgotten all about it! Just to think of it, Anne, I hadn't even remembered to ask if it had lived. My own child! What kind of a brute do you think I am?"

"Merely a puzzled and a frightened one, poor Alexis. Certainly not the monster you imagine. Come, tell me about the baby, dear."

Her compassion fell like oil upon his wounded soul. He loved her for it and for the beautiful calm with which she suppressed her own sorrow, which he sensed strongly beneath his own piercing misery.

"She left me for a moment and returned with a bundle in her arms. The bundle whimpered a little like—like a sick kitten. I was afraid to look, but the nurse thrust it under my eyes and I had to. It was a very ugly baby, Anne. The little face was all screwed up. Pale and puny, not fat and red like the babies in pictures. It made me a little sick at first. I didn't want to touch it. It was sort of uncanny with its great, hazy eyes staring out at me. However, she laid it in my arms and I had to hold it, for fear it might fall on the ground and break if I didn't."

As he stopped for a moment, Anne smiled through tears. How very masculine, even the most feminine of men can be under certain conditions.

A new and softer expression spread over his tired face. The eyes acquired an exalted expression. He continued. "Then an odd thing happened, Anne, a very odd thing! As I held him away from me, he stirred in my arms. I could feel his little feet kick my side, and a tiny fist, like an unopened bud suddenly beat against my breast. A hand, knocking at my heart, the hand of my son! It sent a thrill coursing all over me, Anne. I bent over and kissed the pale, pathetic forehead. And as I met the cloudy eyes, so full of sadness and mystery, I knew that I loved him. And I vowed that I would make it all up to him, cherish him, bring him up to be as different from myself as possible, that he might be both happy and sane. Then, immediately, while he was still in my arms and I could feel him stir against my heart, I thought of you, Anne. I thought of you and knew that you would help us. You, who are so strong, so beautifully sane yourself!"

Alexis rose and threw himself at Anne's feet. He seized her unresisting hands and covered them with kisses.

"Oh, Anne, take pity on us! Love us if you can. We need you so terribly!"

She caressed his head with compassionate hands. "Yes, dearest, yes." Her eyes were tragic as she listened. "We need you so terribly." The words of the Marchesa! She had used them eons ago, when this self-same afternoon was young. Poor Marchesa! Poor Vittorio! They would suffer if they were to lose her. But not like Alexis. Alexis and a baby! Combination of helplessness! If she, Anne, were to forsake them, what would become of them at all? And she owed it to Claire. It was the only reparation she could make for the injuries she had been forced to inflict upon her. To look after Alexis, to cherish him as the dead girl had longed to do herself so that his marvelous art might not be stilled by sorrow, to give her child, poor mite, the love and happiness its mother had craved and never received. Anne's path seemed to lie clear before her tear-washed eyes. Once more, Vittorio would have to be sacrificed. This time forever. But he was strong. His grief would never break him. He would make of it a staff to further progress. But Alexis—for Alexis, her refusal might mean return to that dark Limbo from which she had rescued him once before. And to that fate, so much more bitter than death, Anne could never condemn him.

She pressed her cheek against the head that lay so humbly upon her knees. She raised his face and looked down into the tragic young eyes. A long look, a giving look, a look that poured divine essence of compassion from her very soul, in a sort of spiritual transfusion, until the face between her hands became suffused with rapture.

"No Alexis, do not be afraid, I shall not desert you now. Nothing but your own will can ever separate us."

He looked up at her with the humility of a dumb beast. "Does this mean you are really going to marry me, Anne?" he asked in hushed tones.

She nodded gravely. "If you wish it."

The rapture on his face brimmed over into tremulous laughter.

"Anne, Anne!" He was about to take her in his arms, but she repulsed him with gentle dignity.

"No, Alexis, not now dear."

He understood. A subdued expression veiling his joy, he sat down quietly at a little distance. Anne looked at him gratefully. After all, she could always count upon his delicacy, which was a great comfort.

"Where is the child?" she inquired, making an effort to shoulder her new responsibilities.

He looked pleased. "In the apartment in Gramercy Park. He has a trained nurse, and is getting along very well. I had a cable yesterday. Oh, Anne, will you try to love him?"

Anne smiled through the leaden lassitude that had suddenly fallen upon her. "I shan't have to try. He is little and helpless and yours."

"Anne, my beautiful one, my angel!"

This time she did not evade the effusion, but resigned herself to the hungry young arms.

Much later, after Alexis had gone, and the fire had smouldered into a mound of white dust, Anne went to the telephone, and sent Vittorio the wire which was to nullify so completely her summons of a few short hours ago.

"PITY THAT PAINS"

Anne's villa delighted Alexis, especially the small music room with its frescoed walls and paucity of furniture. It was, he said, the ideal room for music, and they spent their evenings there and many afternoons.

To-day, an outburst of spring rain had driven them gustily indoors. It fell from the skies like a sable veil through which smiling hillsides showed ashen like a woman in mourning. In the garden the cypresses dripped heavily. Water foamed down the gutters in amber cataracts.

A shower of slanting missiles, the rain hurled itself against the windows, drumming upon the panes with the beat of a thousand nervous fingers. Anne shivered a little. From a stool at her side Alexis looked up into her face anxiously. It was pale, and the large eyes gleamed from out dark circles. He took her relaxed hand and stroked it tenderly.

"You look tired, dearest one. Aren't you well this afternoon?"

"My head aches a little."

It was palpable to Alexis that her smile came with an effort. He laid his cheek against her hand with a low, crooning caress.

"Poor darling! What could have caused it? I've never known you to have one before."

She passed a hand over her forehead in the futile gesture that accompanies headache. "I have only had one or two in my whole life."

Her tired smile went to his heart.

"What do you think brought it on?" he persisted. "Have I worn you completely out?"

"Of course not, silly boy!" The over-brilliant eyes hovered upon him restlessly.

"Well, what is it then?" Anxiety rendered him brusque.

"I suppose it was my visit to the Marchesa this morning. It wasn't an easy thing to do, Alexis."

"Telling her about us, you mean?"

She nodded wearily. "You see, she has hoped for years that I would marry her son, and it was rather a blow."

"Poor old lady, of course it was. But didn't she know that you had no intention of marrying him anyway?"

Anne avoided the searching eyes, with elaborate carelessness. "Yes, but so long as I remained single, she always felt there was a chance of my changing my mind."

"Ah, poor old thing! I don't blame her for being upset at losing you. If I were she, I'd want to commit murder. Was she nasty?"

"No-o." Anne frowned a little. In her delicate way the Marchesa had certainly been a trifle ironic. But you couldn't blame her for that, as Anne had not felt it incumbent upon herself to tell the truth in its entirety. Yes, she had been a little cutting and the sting of her words lingered in Anne's heart. Particularly the inference about the nursemaid wives of erratic geniuses. But the pinched look about her mouth, the added pallor upon the frail ivory face had more than excused her. If one chose to wound one's dearest friends by indulging in what must seem like inexplicable freaks, one must suffer the consequences.

"You seem a little uncertain?" During Anne's silence, Alexis' eyes had darkened with renewed suspicion.

His persistence troubled her. She shrugged fatigued shoulders. "Let's forget it, dear. What's the good of rubbing it in? The Marchesa took my news a little harder than necessary perhaps. Our conversation was a very unhappy, miserable affair. You see, I couldn't tell her everything. And so she doesn't quite understand. She merely thinks I've lost my silly old head over a handsome violinist who will some day leave me high and dry for a fresher and prettier woman. Her point of view is natural, quite refreshingly cynical in fact. She suggested I indulge my infatuation by a temporary liaison rather than in marriage, which couldn't fail to be fatal!"

She burst into a hysterical little laugh, which Alexis resented furiously.

"Wicked old witch! And I was sorry for her a little while ago!"

He drew the stool to Anne's knees, and leaned his weight against her. "You do love and trust me don't you, dearest?"

"Of course. Why not?" She used a light tone purposely. Her fatigue would permit of no other.

"I've never looked at any other woman but you, Anne. I never even notice women on the street. In my audiences they are just so many blank discs that come to life under my music, and then melt back again into the common mass. No, I shall never be a woman-chasing man. You and my music and the poor little child whom between us, we're going to make a happy little child, will more than fill my life."

His enraptured expression struck Anne with a pang. Poor Alexis, there was so much more good in him than he had ever been given credit for. That he was neither light nor sensual she had surmised from the beginning. But even she had never plumbed the depths of nobility that lay concealed beneath the child-like and difficult temperament. Perhaps, after all, the future might turn out to be less dark than she feared. She threw her arms about his shoulders.

"We're going to be happy, aren't we?" Her voice unconsciously pleaded.

Eyes closed, he snuggled against her.

"Happy? I shall be exultant as a god. As for you, you're such an angel that my joy may be enough for you! But I shall try, how I shall try to make you happy, too. How proud I shall be of my wife. When people see you sitting in a box at my concerts, they will ask who is that radiant creature? And the answer will be 'Mme. Alexis Petrovsky.' 'Is she not wonderful?' Men will go mad over you. They will want to fight duels over you with me. But I shall laugh in their faces. For you will be mine."

"Silly boy!" Her hand caressed his shoulder.

"In another six weeks we will be in Paris together. Anne and music and Paris! I don't dare think of it! I'm afraid something will happen, that I'll burst of joy perhaps first!"

"You ought to be able to count on lasting through the next few weeks without asking too much of the gods," laughed Anne.

"I don't know. They are said to be jealous! But enough gloom! Do you still like your ring dear?"

"I'm crazy about it. It's the most beautiful I have ever seen!"

She held out her hand and they admired the ring with rather comical gravity. An enormous emerald cut square and set in a delicate lacework of diamonds and platinum, it etherealized the white hand to the point of fragility.

"My collection of emeralds ought to be complete. First my bracelet, then the pendant, and now my ring."

He protested scornfully. "Complete, I should say not! I intend to hang ropes of emeralds all over you yet, when I'm really famous," he boasted with boyish glee.

"Until I fall dead beneath their weight, like the princess in the fairy tale!" Her arm dropped from about his shoulder wearily.

With a remorseful look at her pale face, he left her and walked to the window.

"Look, the rain has stopped. It was only a shower after all. The hillsides are smiling again. And the garden is as fresh and dewy as a pretty woman after her bath. Shall we go out?"

He opened the French window and they stepped out on to the flagged terrace. Polished by rain, diamond-studded, in the late afternoon sun, the garden sent up renewed incense, a symphony of rare fragrance, that mounted into the air like music.

"It reminds me of one of Liszt's rhapsodies," said Alexis, his fingers wielding an imaginary bow.

"Some day I shall compose a rhapsody of my own and call it, 'To a Tuscan Garden.'"

"Ah, but next month when the roses are out, that is the most enchanting of all," sighed Anne dreamily.

"But we shall not be here then," he retorted. "We shall already be on our way to Paris—I mean to Paradise!" He laughed unsteadily. "Anne, think of it. Think of you and me alone in the *wagon-lit*. Won't it be deliciously improper? I shall boast before the guards. It will be my wife desires this, and that. 'Please close the window. My wife doesn't like a draught!'" He was so comic in his pantomime that Anne laughed until the tears came.

"You young rogue!"

He pressed her arm against his side.

"How is the poor head, dear? How would you like to lie down in the hammock and let me play to you, while the sun sinks back of the city, and sets the old *Duomo* on fire!"

"What a Neronic inspiration!" She smiled with an effort. "But dear, would you think it beastly of me if I sent you home now? My head is really rather bad and if I don't make an effort to get rid of it, it may get the better of me."

Immediately, he was full of remorse.

"Of course not. Why didn't you send me packing a long time ago? I'll run right along and you go to bed like a good girl. Shall I see you in the morning?"

"Weren't we going to the Uffizi? I know you detest sightseeing as much as I do. But there are some things you simply mustn't miss."

He looked doubtful. "But are you fit to go, darling?"

"Indeed I am. All I need to put me on my feet is a good night's rest. To-morrow I shall be right as rain."

"Well, if you aren't, I'll come up and nurse you myself. Shall I take my violin back with me, or leave it here as usual?"

"Oh, leave it. You won't need it to-night. And it's safer here than at the hotel. Well, good-by. You're a dear to put up with all my pains and aches."

"Such dear aches and pains, all caused by my own brutal self!"

She held out her hands. He kissed the palms lingeringly, and then swung down the terrace towards the courtyard, where his car was waiting by the tall iron gates. Slim, flexible as a steel blade, small shapely head, aureoled in the setting sun, he trod the air like a young god.

Anne looked after him wistfully. As he disappeared around the angle of the house, fatigue mounted about her in dizzy waves, sucked her down, engulfed her in a dark, pulsating embrace, like the swirl of black waters.

Brilliant afternoon faded into dark, moonless night. Gun-metal clouds obscured, one by one, the beckoning stars. A breeze, warm and sweet-smelling as the breath of cattle, stirred in the tops of the trees.

From her deck upon the garden terrace, Anne watched the clouds as, with swollen sails, they scurried like miraged galleons upon an inverted sea. Her headache eased, it had left behind a trail of lassitude. She lay back in her chair, too weary for thought, spent to the point of serenity, at truce with an unsubstantial world.

When footsteps cut crisply upon the brick stairway, she did not even trouble to turn her head.

"Is that you, Alexis?" she called languidly.

Vittorio's voice broke upon her lethargy with the abruptness of a stone thrown into a stagnant pool.

"No, it is I, Vittorio."

Pierced as by a blade, her numbness fell from her like a mantle. She rose, and leaning against the balustrade, gave vent to a thin cry. "I told you not to come!"

"But surely, you didn't expect to be obeyed?" Etched against the sombre heavens, Vittorio loomed disproportionately large. He approached and seized her hands almost roughly.

"My mother says you are going to marry this Petrovskoy. Tell me it isn't true, Anna *mia*?"

"Yes." She made a feeble effort to withdraw her hands.

"But I thought he had a wife already."

"She—she died a few weeks ago. Won't you please let go my hands?"

His grasp tightened. "How do you know he is telling you the truth?"

She threw back her head proudly. The curve of her throat shone through the dusk like a white pillar. "Alexis is not a liar!"

Vittorio laughed grimly. It was worse than he had feared. "But you cannot mean to marry him. He is entirely out of your class, an artist, a Bohemian. If you cannot protect yourself from such people, I must do it for you."

Anne succeeded in wrenching away her hands.

"I have not asked for your protection, Vittorio Torrigiani."

"No, *madonna mia*, but you need it. You suddenly decide to throw away your life and expect me to sit calmly by. I warn you I am desperate. I cannot permit this sacrilege."

"Sacrilege? You call this sacrilege? If you had used that word a few months ago you might have come nearer to the truth. But now——!"

He broke in quickly. "Ah, that was different. That was only for the time being. This is for life. That was a whim, a condescension. Not to be taken seriously like marriage."

"I took it seriously," her voice was quick with reproach.

"I know you did, and I loved you for it, although it nearly broke my heart. To feel that you belonged to another man, that you had given yourself of your own free will was the most fearful hell I hope to ever have to undergo. But this is ten times worse. It isn't only that I am going to lose you forever, that is bad enough, God knows, but to know that you will be miserable, unhappy, completely out of your sphere. Ah, that is more than I can bear."

She laid her hand upon his sleeve pleadingly. "But if I can bear it, if I feel that it is the right thing to do? Won't that help at all, Vittorio?"

"But how can I know that you are not sacrificing yourself again? There is something mysterious about this. You are keeping something back, Anne."

She turned from him with a hopeless shrug and leaned her elbows on the balustrade.

"There's nothing mysterious about it, Vittorio. Alexis is alone in the world. He needs me and I am fond of him."

He went towards her impulsively. "Fond of him! You call that love? Fond, is that a word to build a marriage upon?"

"I'm only quoting you. Haven't you told me many times that love wasn't necessary to a happy marriage?"

"If I did I was lying and you knew it, my Anne, or you would have taken me a dozen times over. And I was always patient because I felt that love would come to you finally. And lately, I was so happy, happier than for years. Your letters were so wonderful. I could hear you calling to me between the lines. I felt the time was rapidly approaching when you would awaken to your need of me. Oh, Anne, you're not a capricious woman. You couldn't have written to me like that just out of caprice. I feel I have the right to ask for an explanation."

She turned towards him blindly as he leaned beside her on the parapet. Their groping hands met and clung. "You have a right to all I can tell you, Vittorio." Her fingers trembled in his strong clasp. "But there isn't much to say. When I wrote you I thought I was free. And—then he came—and I discovered that I had made a mistake. So I telegraphed to you not to come."

The grasp upon her hand tightened nervously. "You mean you discovered that it was he and not I whom you loved after all?"

"Perhaps," her voice came muffled.

"But don't you know, dear heart?"

The fingers in his fluttered. "Yes—I know."

The words were almost inaudible. And he was forced to lean close in order to hear them at all. Then almost before she knew it, his arms were about her. His lips rained kisses upon her averted face.

"*Carissima*, it is I whom you love. I, Vittorio! How many times shall I have to tell it to you?"

The exultant voice deafened her. Giddy, on the point of defeat, she pushed him away with the palms of her hands, and fell into a chair.

"Don't. Don't." Face hidden in her fingers, she began to sob weakly.

"Yes, yes. It is the only way to save you from yourself."

Falling on his knees beside the chair, he removed the hands from her tear-wet face. "Now—tell me all," he commanded.

She faltered out the pitiful story of Claire's death and Alexis's remorse.

"So you see how he needs me," she ended.

"But I—I need you too," he insisted desperately, crushed by the tragedy of it all.

"Not the way he does," she interposed. "Oh, Vittorio, I have promised. I cannot break my word even——" her voice faltered—"even for you! Nothing but Alexis' own will can ever separate us now!"

He groaned. "But you are not happy. You do not love him. You love me. Even he wouldn't ask you to keep your word if he knew that," he said miserably.

"But he doesn't know. He doesn't dream that I don't love him, poor boy. I'd rather tear myself in pieces than have him guess. He has been so unhappy, so miserable!"

"But Anne, doesn't my unhappiness, my misery, mean as much to you as his?"

She turned an anguished face towards him, laying her hands upon his shoulders. "You know what it means to me," she gasped. "I—I love you, Vittorio."

His arms closed about her frantically. "This is horrible. You say you love me and yet you are going to marry another man."

"I have given my word," she whispered, against his heart.

They were silent for a moment, while the perfumed breeze rustled in the tree-tops and played with the vines upon the wall.

"What was that?" exclaimed Anne, starting up nervously. A new sound, like a stealthy footstep had

risen from the path beneath them.

"Nothing, dearest." Vittorio rose and peered over the parapet, into the black pit that was the garden, "Nothing at all. It must have been a fallen branch."

"For a moment I thought it was Alexis," she breathed, hand on bounding heart.

He strolled back to her. "Ah, you see, he frightens you already. He is in the back of your mind constantly. Give him up before it is too late, *cara*. If you don't, I shall have to go to him myself and tell him the truth. If he doesn't release you then, he is a cad."

She stood up and faced him. "If you do that, I shall never see you again. It would be the act of a fiend. It would kill every spark of love that I ever felt for you."

"Anne, Anne, are you asking me to give you up again?" He stretched famished arms towards her.

She wrung her hands against a sudden, smiting anguish, that left her weak and trembling. "Yes——" she whispered. "Vittorio!"

She slipped into his outstretched arms with a strangled cry. Their lips met, lingered, then parted unsatisfied.

Only a few words, a woman's smothered cry, but sufficient to quench forever Alexis' joy. Only a few words in fewer moments, but enough to send tottering the entire foundation of his being, which less than a minute before had towered to the limitless heavens.

A pæan upon the lips, nectar in his veins, he had approached the terrace as if on air. Anne's head was better, so Regina had told him. She had gone out into the garden, was sitting alone under the scattered stars. How surprised she would be when the notes of his violin stole upon her through the night! He would play the Canzonetta from Tchaikowsky's Concerto, the one they both loved the best. It was just the thing for a night like this. A heavy, mysterious night. A night weighted with warm perfume and the promise of hidden rapture. A quivering, mischievous smile upon his lips, he had tiptoed to the bottom of the terrace. Violin tucked beneath his chin, bow raised, ready to sweep the strings, he had suddenly paused. From the terrace above a man's voice had cut into the silence. Alexis held his breath. So Anne was not alone after all? A caller, some unknown man had chosen to-night of all nights to make her a visit. How annoying! And yet how absurd of him to be upset. Why shouldn't Anne have a visitor? It was the most natural thing in the world. Only a monopolist like himself could possibly grudge it her. Besides, it would be a good opportunity to become acquainted with one of Anne's friends. He decided to mount the steps and meet the intruder as cordially as possible, when the sound of Anne's voice, vibrant and agitated, had reached his ears, and he had listened in spite of himself.

"But he doesn't know, he doesn't dream that I don't love him, poor boy!" Then the man's voice, pleading, but masterful. "But, Anne, doesn't my unhappiness mean as much to you as his?"

That answer of Anne's! Those flaying words that laid bare Alexis' soul! That confession of love, which had undermined his whole structure of being!

And the entire horror had passed within the space of a moment. The air still vibrated with Anne's words, was heavy with their import. Stunned, Alexis had crawled out of hearing and leaned against the base of the terrace. Dismembered, leaden, his limbs rocked beneath him sickeningly. Presently, when the strength flowed back into them again, he would creep away to the gates where his car was waiting. Meanwhile, he must be very silent. A single, uneven breath, a smothered sob might betray him. And they must not guess his presence until he was beyond reach or recall. To steal away was the least he could do. He would steal away out of Anne's life, like a thief who has stolen another man's treasure, and then come back surreptitiously, to return it. He, Alexis, was a thief. He had tried to take what did not belong to him. He was an unsuccessful thief, moreover, for Anne's love had never been his. From the bottomless abyss, he knew it now if never before. The woman who had lain in his arms, whose body he had called his own, had never belonged to him at all. She had remained remote as a condescending goddess. Pitiful, without doubt, but fundamentally untouched. "And yet it is her pity that pains me most."

Anne, his Anne, he had made her suffer! She was suffering at this moment, only a few feet away. God, how he hated himself! He must get away immediately, before the sight of her weakened him, the beloved voice shattered his resolution to tatters. Violin clasped mechanically to his breast, he crept along the wall and cut across the grass to the gates. They were still ajar and he slipped through to his car unnoticed.

Haggard, unkempt, he entered his hotel and regardless of curious glances, strode to the bureau and secured his berth on the midnight express for Paris.

Two hours later he was on his way.

But he had left behind him a letter for Anne. A taciturn, incoherent letter that strove to conceal the pain that he knew would wound her so cruelly. She must not be sad for him. She must not blame herself at all. It was not her fault that he had overheard her confession. Above all, she must not be afraid that he would do anything desperate like killing himself. Those old, unbalanced days were gone forever. He must live for his child now and his music. He prayed her not to write or to follow him, as out of her immense pity and charity he was afraid she might be tempted to do. But to give him this chance to prove himself a man to them both. He had played with her magnanimity for the last time. He hoped that she would forgive him all the suffering he had so stupidly caused her. And finally, he begged her to think of him sometimes and to keep his gifts for the sake of the great love he would always bear her.

An incoherent letter, every word of which revealed to Anne his bleeding hurt. With anguished eyes, she visualized, relived his agony. Saw him as he crouched beneath the terrace and overheard her confess her love to Vittorio. Followed on his mad ride back to the city. Stood behind him while he labored over the scrawl which was to conceal from her his pain, his utter desolation. Accompanied and sat beside him in the *wagon-lit* as he steamed put of Florence, out of her life. That same *wagon-lit* of which he had spoken so joyously only yesterday. That *wagon-lit* he had hoped to share with her as his

companion, but in which he had been destined to ride alone. Behind scalding tears, she saw him throw himself onto his berth, watched him as he lay wide-eyed and motionless into the dawn. Passed with him into the future, as exalted, fawned-upon, his child and his violin by his side, he disappeared over the horizon and out of her sight, a pathetic, solitary figure.

EPILOGUE

PURPLE AND GOLD

Urged by a placid breeze, the small boat sped forward with the graceful glide of a swan, its henna-sail reflected in the rippleless waters like tarnish on green bronze. Almost grazing the lush banks it passed the large hotels on the mainland and skirted the island, where the gardens of the villas sprawl luxuriantly down to the Nile.

Anne settled herself in the stern with a sigh of sheer joy. Beneath a large sun hat, her shadowed eyes looked like shining green pools in a dark forest.

"Wail of shadoof, song of sakieh, how I love it," she murmured. She gazed upon the shore, where polished brown bodies bent rhythmically over their world-old task. "If you hadn't taken a holiday this year, Vittorio, I don't know how I should ever have borne it. Let me see, it's three years since we were last in Assuan, isn't it?"

"Yes, but you know you hated to leave the boys, Anne. As for me, I wouldn't have enjoyed it without you." His eyes rested upon her fondly. "How are you enjoying your second honeymoon, *cara*?" He slipped a proprietary arm about her slim waist.

Anne laughed happily and looked askance at the gorgeously-appareled dragoman sitting in the bow with the two sailors. "Really, Vittorio, after ten years of the matrimonial yoke, your devotion deserves honorable mention." One eye still upon the dragoman, she squeezed his hand surreptitiously. "Will you never remember you're married to an old woman? I'll be forty-three in a few months. Heigh-ho!"

Above the mock-tragic sigh her smile was divinely careless, divinely assured. The smile of a woman who knows in every fiber of her being that she is loved. And indeed the years had changed Anne almost not at all. A trifle less slim, her beauty had deepened and perfected in the mold. Brilliant, undimmed, her hair shone like beaten copper beneath the drooping brim of the leghorn.

A little lined, quite gray, certainly more distinguished than before, Vittorio pressed against her side. "Forty-three! Do you call that a great age, foolish one? You are fishing! You know perfectly well that you are as beautiful as ever. If I were jealous, I shouldn't have a moment's peace with the raft of men you always have about you, at home in Florence—and the idle brutes at the hotel here, who seem to have nothing to do but to ogle you from the time you appear in the morning until you disappear at night with my most fortunate self. Some day I expect to be murdered by one of your miserable victims!"

"Old villain, if one of your revered colleagues could hear you now! The celebrated Torrigiani, discoverer of famous relics of infamous royalties, making love to his own wife as they float along the Nile. Why, even the Pharaohs would laugh at you for an old-fashioned frump, although it couldn't have been such a terrible task to be faithful to as many wives as they had!"

As they neared the end of the long island, the branching Nile curved broadly. Myriads of tiny islands like diving seals glutted the waters. Beyond on the shore, the green stopped abruptly, and rolling amber sands stretched palely golden beneath a sky of melted turquoise. Girdled by palms, shod with roses, a pink villa nestled within its garden. From the awninged terrace the sound of faint music wafted upon the scented air, rose above the wail of the shadoof.

Anne and Vittorio looked at each other in surprise.

"A violin," Anne murmured, and listened. The exquisite tones hummed an air unfamiliar to her ears, an air at once heart-breaking and unspeakably beautiful.

"How lovely!" A shade of sadness crept over her face. "The man certainly knows how to play," she clasped her hands closely. The sound of a violin still moved her to the marrow.

The gorgeous dragoman turned about abruptly.

"Ah, *Madame*, ze music please 'er? Zat ees ze mad Englishman."

"The mad Englishman?"

"Ah, yes. 'E is great *artiste*. But 'e is seek, very seek. He 'ave ze consump', you know. Eet ees very bad. 'E spit zee blood. 'E seet all day outside 'e's 'ouse and play ze veolon, and never speak to no ones. 'E's man, 'e good friend mine, 'e tell me."

Hands still clasped together nervously, Anne leaned forward. "What is his name?"

"'Ees name? I forget eet. Very strange for Englis name. More like ze *Russie*. Pe, Pet, but I forgot how eet finis!"

Pale beneath her large hat, Anne prodded him almost angrily. "Try to think, Abdul. Is—is it Petrovsky?"

The dragoman beamed. "Ah, yes, zat ees eet. Per'aps *Madame*, she 'ave 'eard of 'eem?"

Speechless, Anne nodded. Her long white throat worked spasmodically. Vittorio put an arm about her quivering shoulders.

"*Cara mia*, perhaps it is not the same man at all. Do not grieve, dearest."

She shook her head, while the music rose to a crescendo, and stopped momentarily. "I'm almost sure it must be, Vittorio. Don't you remember reading in the paper over a year ago that he had retired from the concert stage on account of ill health? And that I wanted to write to him, but decided that after all these years it would be better not to?"

Vittorio nodded. A look of suffering crept into his eyes.

"Perhaps you are right, Anne. Maybe it is Petrovsky. What do you want to do? Would you like to get off and see him?"

She looked at her husband with startled eyes. Was she to see Alexis again after all these years? Did she have the courage to reopen old wounds? He might be horribly changed from the boy she had known. Illness plays such cruel tricks with one. And she wanted so frightfully to remember him as she had seen him last, when he left her garden over ten years ago. Then his beauty had been triumphant. Aureoled by setting sun, his indelible image had stamped itself upon her memory.

Vittorio's eyes rested upon her pityingly. "Darling, I know it will be hard. If you don't feel able to face it, you mustn't force yourself."

"But if he is ill and lonely?" Her eyes wandered up the garden bank almost fearfully. She turned a pleading face toward her husband. "Vittorio, help me! What shall I do? Do you think seeing me again might do him harm if he is not well?"

Honesty conquering fear, he shook his head. "Why should it? It may even be good for him. Come *coraggio*, Anne!"

His noble simplicity shamed her. A lump in her throat, she nodded dumbly. Vittorio signed to the delighted dragoman. They swung about and put in at the small landing place. Knees trembling beneath her, Anne disembarked, and she and Vittorio strolled up the grassy bank towards the villa.

The music, stilled for the last few minutes, smote the air once more with a tragic, persistent monotony. The player was evidently improvising upon some doleful, Arabic theme, perhaps a song of the boatmen. Anne pressed against Vittorio. "It makes my very soul shed tears," she murmured.

They had neared the house. Low, rectangular, surrounded by palms and rosebushes, it rose directly in front of them. Upon the awninged terrace, iron chair tip-tilted against the pinkish walls, the violinist suddenly ceased playing. He laid his instrument upon the table next to him and looked idly into the distance.

Although unspeakably altered, it was undoubtedly Alexis.

Two great tears gliding down her cheeks, Anne signed to Vittorio to wait for her. She mounted the shallow steps alone and approached Alexis, touching him lightly where the slim shoulders showed gaunt beneath the loose linen coat.

"Alexis?"

As if galvanized by the sound of her voice, the motionless figure sprang suddenly to life. The sunken eyes leaped to Anne's, widened, then remained fixed. She came a little closer.

"It is I, Anne. Don't you know me, Alexis?" she murmured very gently.

The dilated eyes traveled over her face. He passed an emaciated hand over his forehead, beneath dampened locks. "Have I the delirium again?" His voice was hoarse, almost toneless, not the boyish voice she remembered so well. More altered, in fact, than the poor face which, at a distance, still appeared youthful, although near to, it showed lined and haggard, dry skin stretched taut over hectic cheek-bones.

Anne's heart yearned over him sorrowfully. She sat down beside him, and took one of the feverish hands between her cool palms. "No, no, don't be frightened, dear. You are not dreaming. It is really Anne in the flesh. We—that is to say I, was passing by on the water. I heard your violin and stopped to listen. From what my dragoman told me, I guessed it must be you. So I came. Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you?" The altered voice was full of wonder. He still looked at her as if he scarcely believed in her reality. The great suffering eyes, like those of a stray dog who has found a master, wrung her heart. "Forgive you?" he repeated monotonously.

"Yes. For disobeying you and coming to you after all these years?" Her voice was tremulous. As he listened the stiff figure suddenly relaxed, leaned forward with a choked, comprehending cry.

"Anne, Anne, it is really you! Thank God! I have prayed that I might see you once more before I died. God is merciful after all!"

He grasped her hands, at first timidly, then eagerly with hungry insatiability. Ran feverish fingers up her arms to her shoulders, attained her face, caressed it with the groping, seeking gestures of a blind man. Then, with a smothered cry, he fell back limply in his chair.

"Alexis, my poor boy!" The gaunt, dry hands in hers, Anne pressed them to her heart.

Cracked lips parted over set teeth, he leaned back, gasping a little.

"Forgive me," he whispered. "I am still rather weak."

She was frightened.

"Isn't there something I can do for you? Some medicine you can take?"

With a feeble movement of the still-graceful hands, he brushed the idea aside. "The sight of you—is all—I want to cure me completely," he articulated between difficult, hissing breaths. "You are more beautiful than ever, Anne."

Her smile was wistful. "Dear Alexis, I am getting old now."

"Old?" He looked genuinely surprised. "I see no difference," he added with no attempt at compliment. "Oh, Anne, the years, how long they have been in passing!"

She choked back a sob.

"And yet you shouldn't be too unkind to them, dear Alexis, for they have brought you fame."

A wan smile rode the gaunt face. "Fame? What is that? A bubble which dissipates as you grasp it," he snatched at the air. "A flower in your buttonhole that smells sweet at first, but becomes rank before nightfall. A nothing for which you pay with your heart's sweat." He paused and the thin fingers drummed rhythmically on the iron table. "But you mustn't think I am ungrateful, Anne. The work itself, I love, and only for itself. It has kept me sane. That—and the boy." His face brightened. He turned eagerly towards Anne.

"Tell me about him," she whispered. "He must be a big boy by now."

"Almost eleven." The hoarse voice was full of pride. "He is in school in England—I don't dare to keep him with me now." He pointed to his chest. "I miss him every minute, Anne. He has always spent his vacations with me ever since he started going away to school. Before that, we were together constantly. When he was a baby the little beggar would go to sleep for my violin, when his nurse could do nothing with him."

Anne smiled through tears. "You must love each other very much."

"Oh, we do. He went with me on all my long tours. We have been inseparable ever since——" he choked.

She nodded. "Yes, Alexis, I know."

He looked at her somberly. The pent-up tragedy of the years passed by in his dilated pupils. "We will not speak of that," he whispered.

She shook her head. "No, Alexis, but it was ghastly for me, too. I feel I must tell you that, at least. I was ill, not myself, for months. I was on the point of writing you many times but—" she stopped while the crimson spread to her forehead. It seemed too brutal to tell him about Vittorio and the children.

He understood her hesitation and smiled bravely.

"So I did the right thing after all! Anne, dearest, don't be afraid to tell me the truth. Are you happy at last?"

Words were beyond her for the moment. She nodded.

He sighed contentedly. "I am glad—so glad," he breathed. "Are you married and have you children?" he continued with eager simplicity.

"Vittorio and I have been married for almost ten years," she replied brokenly. "We have two little boys," she added quickly.

Longing swept the drawn features. "How I should love to see them," he sighed wearily.

"When you are better you must come to Florence and pay us a long visit," she replied, trying to speak brightly.

He spread his hands, in careless fatalism. He smiled oddly. "When I am better? Yes, when I am better, I'll come."

"And bring the boy," she continued, sturdily ignoring his implication. "What is his name?"

A light dawned back of the misery in his eyes. "Jack. Just a simple English name, as unlike his father's as possible. And oh, Anne, he is unlike me. He cannot play a single musical instrument, although he has been surrounded by musicians all his life. He has no temperament at all. And he loves sports. He has won a lot of medals already. He isn't even very good in his studies."

His naïve pleasure in the latter fact struck Anne as so comical that she actually laughed.

"Funny Alexis!" she said tenderly. "You certainly make an odd father. But tell me, what school is Jack in? You must give me his address. Do you think he would like to come to us for the holidays? That is—" she added hastily, Alexis was sensitive over receiving favors—"if he has made no other plans?"

His face was almost radiant. "He is at Eton. He would love to go to you, I know. If you really want him. I can't have him here—" the smile faded. "And I was worrying about where to send him. But—are you sure your husband wouldn't mind?"

"Vittorio? Never," said Anne confidently. "He loves children. And—and he admires you tremendously, Alexis. There is no, no hard feeling in his heart for you. Vittorio is a very noble man and he appreciates nobility in others!"

Alexis bowed his head upon his chest. "Thank you, my Anne. May I call you that?"

"Oh, yes, of course, Alexis," she patted the hand near hers. She hesitated a moment. "Vittorio is here with me now. Would you like to see him, dear? Or would it be too much for you?"

Alexis' face paled. The dry lips quivered. There was a pause before he replied.

"I should like to see him," he said firmly. "I want to thank him for—for making you so happy."

"You are sure?" she insisted, a little frightened at her temerity in bringing the two men together. The two men whose lives had crossed so fatally, and yet who had never, in the course of events, actually met face to face. Yet, if she were really to help Alexis during the next few weeks of their stay, the meeting was inevitable. Her hesitation was palpable. Alexis reassured her, with pathetic vehemence.

"Of course I am sure. Please call him, Anne darling. Can't you see I've passed beyond all stage of jealousy? My illness seems to have extinguished the evil fire forever."

She smiled at him tenderly. "I'll call him, then."

She walked to the edge of the terrace and beckoned towards the garden. "Vittorio!"

The crystalline tones resounded purely. A tall figure rose from a bench back of the palms and approached them.

"This is my husband, Alexis." Anne's voice rang slightly tremulous.

Alexis got to his feet rather feebly and the two men clasped hands. Vittorio was the first to speak.

"I am sorry you are not well," he said gently, as they all sat down.

Alexis smiled. "That is good of you, Marchese. And it is doubly good of you to permit the Marchesa to see me. I—I am very grateful." The smiling lips quivered.

Vittorio was touched. The stooping figure, the prematurely haggard young face filled him with pity. He made an effort to speak casually.

"I hope you will let us both come to see you very often. We shall be here for at least six weeks."

"You don't know what it will mean to me," said Alexis eagerly. "I've hardly seen a soul for months," he caught himself up sharply, "but I'm sure you must be thirsty. I'll order something to drink at once."

"Please don't bother," cried Anne.

With a smiling shake of the head, he struck an iridescent little gong on the table beside him. Very correct in semitropical livery, an English servant appeared in the doorway.

"What would you like?" said Alexis, turning to his guests. "Some whisky and soda, Marchese? Or would you prefer iced sherbet? Hopkins keeps some on hand for me all the time, as I find it very soothing. Then there is always Turkish coffee, for which we are famous, aren't we, Hopkins?"

"Yes, sir." The man bowed with the flicker of a pleased smile.

They chose the sherbet. Little spiced cakes from the bazaar were passed with it. The conversation became light and unstrained. Since the old days, Alexis had mixed much with the world. Had been a big figure and had progressed beyond ill-ease. After they finished the sherbet, he looked longingly at Anne, and asked if she would not like to try some Slovakian dances with him.

She looked doubtful. "Do you think you ought to to-day, Alexis? Haven't we tired you sufficiently?"

He shook his head gayly. "Oh, no, I haven't felt so fit for ages. Have I, Hopkins?"

"No, sir."

Sherbet cups in his hands, Hopkins coughed discreetly. His mild eyes met Anne's full of respectful warning. She nodded at him behind Alexis' shoulder.

"I think you've had enough excitement for this afternoon," she said firmly. "Suppose I come to-

morrow for a little while?"

He looked radiant. "To-morrow, and every day while you are here!" he said with the tyrannical air of a spoiled child. "But you must play with me now, this minute. The music only arrived yesterday and I haven't tried it yet." He looked at once so wistful and so happy that Anne relented.

"Very well, but only for a little while, mind!"

They entered the house. Rather over-elaborate, the long drawing room was furnished in the French Algerian style with several large divans and an immense Bokhara rug that covered the entire floor. In the corner stood a grand piano brought by Alexis from Cairo. Anne seated herself before it and gave Alexis the key. Hopkins brought up a chair and placed it by the piano for Alexis. He dropped into it with a sulky little air, and commenced to tune up.

"Hopkins thinks it tires me to stand," he apologized crossly.

Then he broke into the dance, ancient fire unquenched, technique magnificently perfected. Plying the keyboard mechanically, Anne listened, shaken to the very marrow. For a moment it seemed as if time had never existed and she was back again in Long Island, young lover by her side, their souls welded in an ecstasy of sound.

Then Alexis stopped suddenly. He reeled in his chair. "I'm—a bit giddy," he gasped. The violin dropped on to the floor from inert fingers. Then came the cough, the racking typhoon of a cough that shattered the frail body in its gust.

Speechless with terror, Anne and Vittorio looked at each other helplessly. Hopkins poured some medicine into a wine-glass and held it ready. He shook his head sorrowfully.

"He shouldn't 'ave done it, ma'am. 'Is cough do be cruel such times."

A stained handkerchief to his lips, Alexis lay back in his chair. Anne's eyes fixed themselves upon the blood with a shudder of pity. The medicine administered, she took Hopkins aside.

"Tell me the worst," she said below her breath. "Is—is he dying?"

Tears gathered in the man's eyes.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. 'Es very bad. The doctor says 'e can't last six months."

"Ah!" Anne stifled a cry, "Have you been with him long?"

The puckered lips trembled. "Hit'll be goin' on seven years, ma'am. H'im sure hi don't know 'at'll become of me when 'es gone. Hi'll feel kinder lost-like."

Anne looked at him gratefully.

"Hadn't you better get the doctor now?" she whispered above the lump in her throat.

He shook his head sadly.

"Oh, no, ma'am. There h'ain't nothin' 'e could do for 'im. Jest to lay down and be quiet like is what 'e needs, ma'am."

Anne took the hint meekly. She went up to the two men, and took hold of Vittorio's arm where he stood leaning over Alexis.

"We must go now, Vittorio. Alexis needs rest. I'm afraid we should never have come!" Her sorrowful eyes met Alexis' apologetic gaze.

"Oh, don't say that," he pleaded weakly. "I have an attack like this very often now."

She held out her hand and he grasped it with feeble fingers.

"It has been heaven to see you again," he whispered. "Now I can die happy."

Anne knelt down by the chair. From her aching eyes brimmed scalding tears.

"You are going to get well, dear," she murmured, "we are going to make him, aren't we, Vittorio?"

But the end was not yet. Several weeks were to pass first. Meanwhile, Anne went to the villa every day. Once or twice, when Alexis felt stronger, they played a little. But he tired almost immediately. After a while they gave it up tragically, tacitly. She read to him instead. And they talked a little. But day by day he grew perceptibly weaker, and the coughing spells racked him with greater ferocity.

One day a letter came from Jack at Eton, accepting with glee Anne's invitation for the holidays. And Alexis, realizing that the end was near, listened with joy as Anne read it to him, and added of her own accord that she and Vittorio wanted to look after the boy in the future.

"In that way," she added almost timidly, "I can be a mother to him after all."

Alexis made no reply. He merely raised emaciated hands to his face, and Anne saw that he wept.

That afternoon the sunset was unusually resplendent. Purple and gold, it spread to the horizon where rolling, amber sands merged into saffron skies. Anne's boat, its henna sail lurid against heaven, floated upon a sheet of solid gold. Solid gold, Anne's gleaming hair as, hatless, she crouched weeping in the stern beside Vittorio. While purple clouds faded into black and black and gold fused into lacquer.

That afternoon the sunset was unusually resplendent, but Anne wept because Alexis was no longer there to see.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ERRATIC FLAME ***

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one

owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE
THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by

U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs

and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable

donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.