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Author: Harriet L. Smith
Illustrator: Frank T. Merrill

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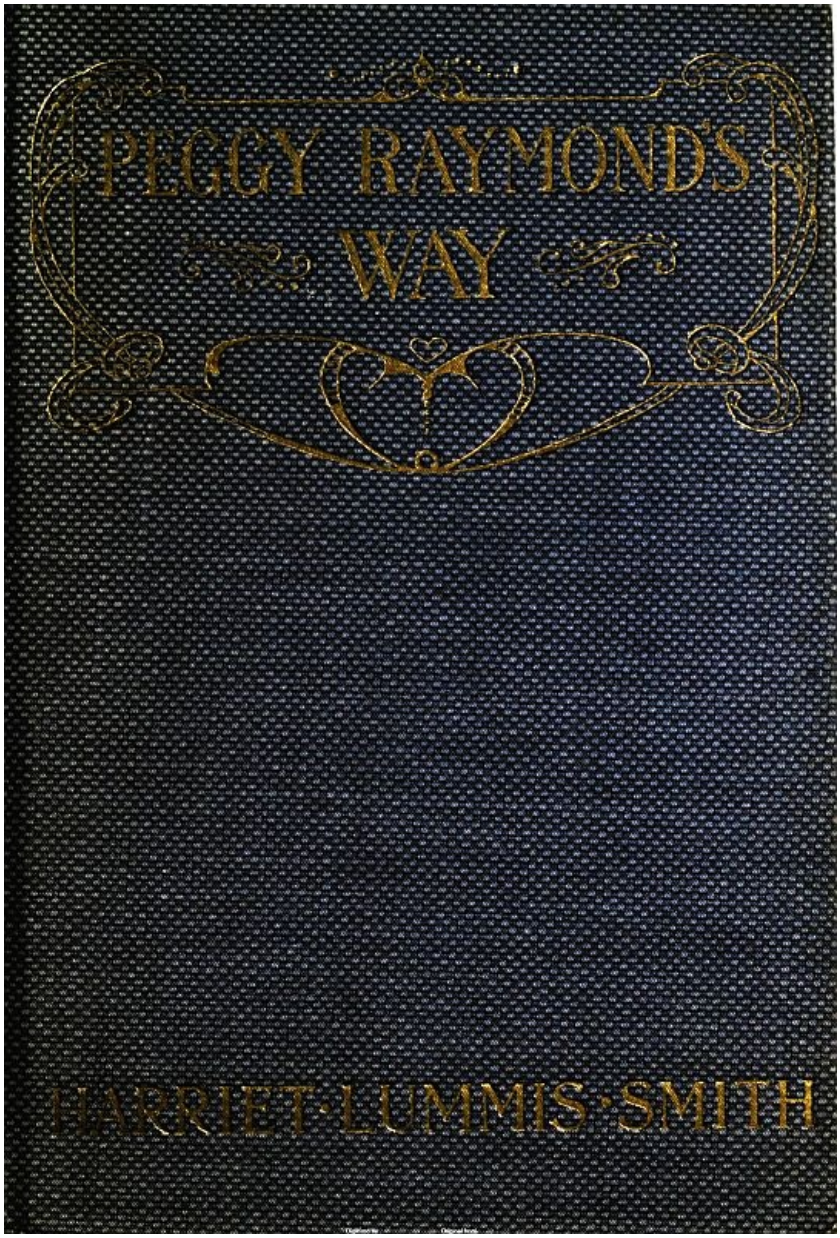

PEGGY RAYMOND'S WAY

Or

BLOSSOM TIME AT FRIENDLY TERRACE

The Friendly Terrace Series

BY
HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

The Girls of Friendly Terrace	$1.65
Peggy Raymond's Vacation	1.65
Peggy Raymond's School Days	1.65
The Friendly Terrace Quartette	1.65
Peggy Raymond's Way	1.75

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BY

HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

Author of "The Girls of Friendly Terrace," "Peggy Raymond's Vacation," "Peggy Raymond's School Days," "The Friendly Terrace Quartette," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY

FRANK T. MERRILL

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Peggy Raymond's Way

CHAPTER I
WHAT'S IN A NAME?

It was the first day of the spring vacation, and Amy Lassell had spent it sewing. To be frank, it had not measured up to her idea of a holiday. Self-indulgence was Amy's besetting weakness. Her dearest friend, Peggy Raymond, was never happy unless she was busy at something, but Amy loved the luxury of idleness.

Yet although indolence appealed so strongly to Amy's temperament, to do her justice she was generally able to turn a deaf ear to its call. The first summer after America's entry into the war she had enlisted in the Land Army along with Peggy and Priscilla, and then in the fall had taken up her work at the local Red Cross headquarters, serving in an unpaid position as conscientiously as if she had received a salary and was depending on it for her bread and butter. [2]

After a strenuous year with the Red Cross, Amy had entered college with Ruth Wylie. Neither girl had expected to enter till after the close of the war, and Amy was continually harping upon the respect which the young and unsophisticated Freshmen were bound to feel for classmates of such advanced years. But Nelson Hallowell's discharge from the service had altered the aspect of affairs. Ruth had pledged herself to keep Nelson's position for him till he should return, and Amy had promised to wait for Ruth. The wound which had kept Nelson in the hospital less than a month had nevertheless incapacitated him from military service. Heavy-hearted, he had returned to his job at the book store, while Ruth and Amy had immediately made their plans for entering college just two years behind Peggy and Priscilla.

After her months of hard study, the first day of the spring vacation found Amy at the sewing machine, which in itself was sufficient proof that, whatever her natural bias in the direction of [3] indolence, her will was more than a match for that tendency. As a matter of fact she was the only one of the Friendly Terrace quartette to spend the day in unremitting industry. Peggy and Ruth had gone off with Graham for the day. Priscilla was entertaining an out-of-town guest. But Amy, resolution manifest in every line of her plump little figure, was sewing for dear life.

Though the armistice had been signed months before, there still remained foes to fight, as the girls had promptly discovered. The reaction from economy and hard work had come in the shape of an orgy of extravagance and frivolity. The high war prices were continually going higher, as dealers realized that people would get what they wanted regardless of price. The four Friendly Terrace girls, after an afternoon of shopping which had ended in the purchase of a box of hair-pins and two spools of thread, had returned home to hold a council of war.

"The only way to bring prices down is to stop buying things," declared Peggy, with all the authority of a college Junior. "I don't know as I have anything to make over, but if I have, nothing [4] new for me this spring."

Amy sighed. "I'd just been luxuriating in the thought of a lot of new dresses," she said mournfully. "Don't you know how after you've been dieting, all at once you're hungry for creamed chicken and pineapple fritters, and chocolate with whipped cream, and strawberry sundaes, all rolled into one. And that's just the way I feel about clothes. But I suppose it will end in my making over my blue taffeta."

"I've two or three summer dresses that will do very well if I make the skirts scanty," said Ruth. "They're too full for this season."

They talked on seriously, planning their little economies as if they expected unaided to bring down the high cost of living. They were not the sort of girls who follow the crowd unthinkingly, nor had any of them contracted the fatal habit of asking, "What can one do?" The program they outlined would have resulted in a general lowering of prices in a month's time if every one had agreed to it. And it did not occur to them that public indifference excused them from doing their [5] little part toward combating a serious evil.

That was how it happened that Amy Lassell had spent the spring day sewing. The blue taffeta had been ripped and pressed in anticipation of the vacation leisure, and as soon as the breakfast dishes were out of the way Amy had commandeered the dining-room table as a cutting table. With the help of a paper pattern she had remodeled the taffeta according to the latest dictates of fashion. Caution suggested that it would be advisable to wait for assistance in the fitting, but having basted the breadths together and surveyed her reflection in the mirror, Amy had been so favorably impressed that she had gone to work energetically stitching up seams.

Like many people whose natural tendency is in the direction of indolence, Amy was capable of relentless industry, almost as though she were afraid that if once she halted she might not get her courage to the point of starting again. She swallowed a hasty luncheon and rushed back to her sewing. Her eyes grew tired, her back ached. She became nervous and hot and impatient, so [6] that breaking a thread or dropping a thimble seemed almost a calamity. And yet she did not stop.

It was after five when she laid her work reluctantly aside. Amy's responsibilities for the day were not limited to the blue taffeta. As in many another household, the domestic service problem had become acute in the Lassell establishment during the last few years. Incapable servants demanding preposterous wages, had been replaced by others equally incompetent, and there had been interims when it had been difficult to secure so much as a laundress. Amy and her mother had learned a good many short cuts to achievement, and had accepted the frequent necessity of doing their own work with a philosophy of which they would have been incapable in pre-war times. On this first day of vacation Amy was without a servant, and without a mother, as well; for Mrs. Lassell had left home that morning not to return till nearly bed-time.

At five o'clock the realization that she must prepare her father's supper forced itself on Amy's attention. It was not a formidable responsibility, for at breakfast that morning Mr. Lassell had [7] informed her that he was to take a customer out to lunch and would be satisfied with very little for the evening meal. Amy meant to take him at his word. There was cold meat, quite enough for two, she thought; and some potatoes to fry, and her father did not care much for dessert. Accordingly, Amy had waited till five o'clock before she laid down her sewing, and then she realized for the first time how very tired she was. A glimpse of herself in the mirror emphasized her certainty that it was high time to stop. Amy's fair hair was disheveled, her plump cheeks brilliantly pink. There were dark lines under her eyes, eloquent of weariness. Amy regarded herself with extreme disfavor.

"Looks as if I'd taken up rouge in my old age. And I positively must do my hair over. I can't ask even poor patient daddy to look at such a frowsy head all through supper. O, well, he won't mind, if I am a little late."

Encouraging herself with this reflection, Amy bathed her burning cheeks, combed her hair hastily, and slipped into a little gingham gown which, if somewhat faded and passée, had at least [8] the merit of being fresh and clean. It buttoned in the back, and by virtue of much twisting and stretching Amy finally succeeded in securing the middle button which for a time had defied her efforts. And just as she did so, the door-bell rang.

Amy went placidly downstairs. She had no apprehensions about the door-bell. She took it for granted that it was somebody to collect for the newspaper, or an old-clothes man, or else a friend so intimate that she could ask her into the kitchen while she made her supper preparations. As she reached the door she realized her mistake. Of the two young people waiting admission she had met the sister several times. The brother she knew merely by sight, for the family had moved into the neighborhood only recently.

For a moment Amy's mood was one of unqualified dismay. She wanted to turn and run. With lightning-like rapidity she compared her faded gingham with the stylish frock setting off the girlish, graceful figure of Hildegarde Carey. And Hildegarde's brother, Robert, if looking a trifle [9] bored, was immaculately attired. Amy recollected that in her absorption with the blue taffeta she had neglected to dust the living room that morning.

Amy opened the door with a smile that poorly concealed her anguish of spirit. Her flickering hope that Hildegarde had made a mistake in the number was dissipated by the composure of Hildegarde's greeting. The two young people entered, as Amy realized, without waiting to be asked, and in the hall Hildegarde performed the ceremony of introduction.

"Come right in," said Amy with a misleading air of cordiality. She wondered if she had better apologize for the undusted living room, but decided against it. Perhaps they would overlook it, though Robert Carey impressed her as one who would notice the least little thing out of the way. Amy decided that the young fellow's handsome face was almost spoiled by its discontented expression.

"'COME RIGHT IN,' SAID AMY WITH A MISLEADING AIR OF CORDIALITY"

Another shock came when she said to Hildegarde, "Let me take your coat." She expected Hildegarde to reply that the coat was light and that she did not mind it for the few minutes she had to stay; but on the [10] contrary she not only removed her coat, but slipped off her gloves, unpinned her hat, and added it to the collection Amy carried into the hall with a growing sense of stupefaction. "Any one would think," she told herself, "that she was an old friend come to spend the day."

Perhaps Amy's perplexity partly explained the fact that the next half hour dragged. Amy was not her usual entertaining self. She thought of the dust showing gray against the shining mahogany of the piano. She thought of her faded gingham. She heard herself talking stupidly, unnaturally, and chiefly about the weather. Robert Carey looked more bored than ever.

At half past six her father came in. He glanced at the group in the living room as he entered, and Amy hastily summoned him. Her guests must realize that when the man of the house came home it was time to leave. Amy introduced her father, pulled out an arm chair invitingly, and Mr. Lassell seated himself. It was from him that his daughter had inherited her sense of humor, and on this occasion he made himself much [11] more entertaining than Amy had done. The conversation became almost animated.

The clock in the hall struck seven, tolling out the notes sonorously. Every one seemed to be listening to it, and Amy flushed. It was almost as if the clock had said, "Time to go home! Time to go home!" And then to her horror her father turned toward her inquiringly. "Hadn't you better put on the supper, my dear?" he asked. "Your friends will be getting hungry."

For an agonized half minute Amy vainly tried to think of something she could say to soften the blow. She was magnanimous enough to acquit her father of all blame. Seeing them sitting there at that hour, especially as Hildegarde had taken off her hat, he had innocently assumed that they had been invited to dinner. And of course his blunder was equivalent to saying that they had stayed longer than was proper or desirable.

Then Amy's head whirled again. Her guests did not spring to their feet as she had expected them to do, protesting that they had not dreamed it was so late. Instead they sat quite still, only [12] murmuring a polite disclaimer of being hungry. With the force of a blow the realization came over Amy that they had accepted her father's tacit invitation. They were going to stay to supper.

Amy rose, murmuring something unintelligible, and got out of the room quickly. O, if Peggy were only home, Peggy who had such a faculty for evolving something savory and appetizing from the least promising materials. Amy's cooking until recently had been confined to chafing-dish delicacies and candy. It was too late, she realized, to add to her scanty stores. She must feed four people with what had seemed barely enough for two, and must do it quickly.

Mechanically she lighted the oven of the gas stove. She remembered there was a can of tomato soup in the house, and the cold meat, sliced very thin, might possibly pass muster. She herself would refuse meat. Luckily there was a generous plateful of potatoes. Creamed and with a little cheese grated over them, they would be appetizing—and filling. She could make baking powder [13] biscuit,—Amy excelled in baking powder biscuit—and there was honey to eat with them. For dessert she would fall back on preserved peaches and some left-over fruit cake. It was a queer, hit-or-miss meal, not a company repast in any sense of the word, but the best she could do under the circumstances.

It was while the biscuits were browning in the oven, and Amy was hastily setting the table for four, that her native common-sense re-asserted itself. "After all," her thoughts ran, "if people take pot luck, they can't expect to find things just as they would be if they were especially invited. They've seemed real friendly and if they like me well enough to stay to a pick-up supper, the first time they've ever set foot in my home, I ought to meet them half way. I can't give them much to eat, but I don't need to be quite as stupid as I've been for the last hour."

And so it came about that when the guests were summoned to the dining room, they encountered a very different hostess from the one who had entertained them previously, a hostess who twinkled and sparkled and kept them laughing. It seemed to Amy that, when she had [14] removed the soup plates and brought in the sliced meat and creamed potatoes, she had seen an expression of astonishment flicker across Hildegarde's face, but she resolutely put the thought aside and continued to make herself agreeable. The baking-powder biscuits had risen nobly to the occasion. Amy thought them the best she had ever made. And she saw with relief that the bored expression had disappeared from Robert Carey's face, and that he really seemed to be enjoying himself.

Then suddenly into the midst of all this gaiety, Hildegarde dropped a bomb in the shape of a question. "What happened to detain Isabel?"

"Isabel?"

"Yes, Isabel Vincent, you know."

"I'm afraid," Amy hesitated, "that I don't know any one of that name."

Apparently the meal had come to a full stop. "Why," Hildegarde cried, "the Isabel Vincent who attended the Pelham school when I was there."

She was so insistent that Amy unconsciously became apologetic. "I'm sorry but I can't say I [15]
remember such a girl. Did she ever say she had met me?"

"Why," Hildegarde almost screamed, "didn't you ask us here to-night to meet her?"

"To meet Isabel Vincent! Why, I never heard of her."

"There's some mistake," exclaimed Robert. He had just helped himself to a fifth baking-powder biscuit, but he laid it down unbuttered. "You've made some mistake," he informed his sister.

Hildegarde ignored him and addressed herself to Amy. "Didn't you telephone me this morning?"

"I—why, to tell the truth, no I didn't."

"Then it was a disgusting practical joke. Some one called me up about eleven o'clock and said she was Amy Lassell, and that Isabel Vincent was to stop here twenty-four hours on her way to New York from her home in Chicago. And then she invited Bob and me to dinner to meet Isabel. There wasn't anything in her manner to give me an idea it was a hoax."

But Amy had found the clew. "O, did Isabel come from Chicago?" she cried. "Then I know. It [16]
was Avery Zall who telephoned you."

"But I don't know her."

"She went away to boarding school—yes, it was the Pelham school, I'm sure. And I know she has a friend from Chicago visiting her. Probably the Vincent girl spoke of knowing you, and Avery called you up. O, dear!" groaned Amy with a sudden change of countenance.

"What's the matter?" demanded Bob Carey, still ignoring his biscuit.

"I've cheated you out of a regular feast. The Zalls have a wonderful cook. You'd have had broiled chicken and fresh mushrooms and I don't know what beside, and I've given you cold meat and—"

"You've given us the best biscuits I ever ate," said Bob, and buttered his fifth, but his sister had turned pale.

"I don't believe any one ever did such a dreadful thing before. Here we descended on you without warning and simply forced you to invite us to stay—"

"Happy escape, I think," said Bob. "If there's anything I hate, it's these social stunts [17]
Hildegarde's crazy about."

"The only dreadful part," said Amy, reassuring the distressed Hildegarde, "is that you've exchanged a perfectly gorgeous dinner for a pick-up supper."

"But what must Miss—Miss Zall think of me?"

"She must know there's some mistake. Probably they're not waiting dinner any longer, for it's after eight o'clock."

"O," groaned Hildegarde, "I never was so mortified. What am I going to do?"

"It seems to me you'd better finish your supper, such as it is," suggested Amy. "And then you can call up Avery Zall and explain your mistake. She'll see that the names sound alike over the phone. And after that there'll be plenty of time to see your friends."

"Seems to me," suggested Bob, "that as long as we've started the evening here, we might as well put it through."

His eyes met Amy's with a twinkle that was like a spark to tinder. Amy struggled for a moment, [18]
then gave way to peals of laughter.

"O," she gasped, when at length she could find her voice, "What must you have thought of me, inviting you to dinner and then coming down in this old, faded gingham."

"And what must you have thought of *me*," Hildegarde cried, "coming at such an hour and calmly taking off my hat."

"The dust was thick over everything," giggled Amy. "I've been sewing every minute all day long, and I warned father to expect a light meal."

"I should have known I had made a mistake," Hildegarde lamented, "when you never said a

word about Isabel. I don't know how I could have been so ridiculously stupid."

But for all her dismay, she laughed. Indeed if laughter aids digestion, there was little danger that Amy's biscuits would disagree with any one, even Robert, who had dispatched such an extravagant number.

While Amy cleared the table and brought in the dessert, Hildegarde went to the phone and explained matters to a young woman whose preliminary stiffness melted as Hildegarde reviewed [19] the situation. And then Hildegarde hurried back to inform her brother that they must go over as soon as he had finished. "She was as sweet as she could be, but she said they had waited dinner an hour."

"So it's up to you to 'gobble and git,'" quoted Amy, dishing out the preserves with a lavish hand.

"I'm not going to be hurried over that fruit cake," declared Bob. "It carries me back to the merry Christmas time."

"It ought to, for it's a Christmas cake, but it's been kept in a tin box with an apple and I hope it isn't dry. It was all I had in the cake line." Amy paused to laugh again. "I really must stop," she exclaimed, wiping her moist eyes. "They say that laughing at meal-time makes one fat, and I don't dare risk another pound."

"Can't have too much of a good thing," declared Bob Carey with a significant glance at the flushed face. Strictly speaking, Amy was perhaps the least pretty of the four Friendly Terrace girls; but good humor has a charm, and a face radiant with fun can hold its own against [20] discontented beauty any day. There was such frank admiration in the look the young man bent upon her, that Amy's cheeks grew hot with an unwonted self-consciousness.

The brother and sister left with evident reluctance. "Now we've had dinner with you," said Hildegarde, "you must dine with us very soon."

"Oh, this doesn't deserve to be counted," Amy laughed. "I'll ask you again some day and show you what I can do if I really try."

"No, don't," pleaded Bob. "Have us again when you're going to have biscuit. It's so much jollier to be informal than to work the society racket." And then Hildegarde carried him off, protesting that, if they didn't hurry, Avery Zall would not believe a word of her excuse.

Amy found her father clearing the table. She put on her long apron and joined him, chattering excitedly as she worked.

"No full garbage can to-night, Daddy. Every dish is scraped clean. I suppose I ought to feel crushed over setting such a meal before people I hardly knew, but somehow I don't." [21]

Her father smiling, responsive to her high spirits, shook his head.

"It isn't much to set good food before folks, Amy. Any waiter in a restaurant can do that. Give people the best of yourself and you don't need to worry about your bill of fare."

CHAPTER II [22]

A TELEPHONE PARTY

HOWEVER much the rest of the year may drag, the spring vacation always ignores the speed limit. What with dress-making and shopping, and going over one's bureau drawers and closets in anticipation of the spring cleaning, and trying to do the things one has been postponing till this week of leisure, and taking advantage of all the pleasures that start up like mushrooms, twenty-four hours in a day are all too few. When Priscilla dropped in on Peggy to suggest going out into the country for wild flowers, the Monday afternoon that closed the holiday season, Peggy hesitated.

"I'd love it. I don't feel that spring is really here until I have picked a few violets and spring beauties. But I was thinking of going to see Mary Donaldson."

"Why, is anything the matter?" Priscilla asked.

Peggy stared, "Matter! You know that since that attack of inflammatory rheumatism she hasn't [23] walked—"

"But I meant anything new."

"O, there's nothing *new*, not as far as I know. I haven't been in to see Mary since—O, dear, I'm afraid it's been an age."

"I only meant," explained Priscilla reasonably, "that if Mary's no worse off than she has been for the last year and a half, there's no especial point in taking to-day to go to see her. You could go any afternoon."

"I could," owned Peggy with a significant inflection.

"And it's such a perfect day to go after wild flowers."

Peggy looked from the window. The blue sky seemed to smile an invitation. Priscilla's argument all at once appeared unanswerable.

"Yes, isn't it lovely!" Peggy drew a long breath. "Too lovely to stay indoors. I'll go to see Mary some stormy afternoon when she needs cheering up."

And now that her decision was made, the thought of Mary Donaldson passed completely from [24] Peggy's mind. She had never been particularly intimate with this class-mate, and had it not been for Mary's illness it is unlikely that the two girls would have seen much of each other after high school days. But the winter of Peggy's Freshman year, an attack of rheumatism had left Mary seriously crippled. Though now she was able to be dressed and to hobble from her bed to a chair by the window, getting downstairs was too difficult a process to be considered, except on very especial occasions. With all the yearnings for life and joy that characterize the normal girl, Mary was condemned to vibrate between her bed and chair.

It was not strange that with all her sympathy Peggy had found it difficult to see much of her invalid friend. The demands made by the war upon the scanty leisure of a college student left her little time she could call her own. She had worked making surgical dressings under the Red Cross, and had given much time to collecting and mending worn garments for the destitute children of Belgium and France. She had subscribed for a bond in each of the Government loans, [25] and to pay for these with her own earnings had required hard work and careful financing. On the whole, though Peggy was sorry not to have seen more of Mary Donaldson, her conscience acquitted her of neglect.

The season was advanced and the girls had no difficulty in filling their baskets with the early arrivals among the wild flowers, and as their baskets filled, they feasted their eyes on the myriad indeterminate shades of a spring landscape, and drank in the exhilarating odors of damp earth, warmed by the April sun. When Peggy's wrist-watch warned them it was time to start for home, they went reluctantly, with an unreasonable feeling that in returning to town they were leaving the spring behind them.

At their transfer point a sign in a drug store window caught Amy's eye. "Ice cream soda with fresh fruit," she read impressively. "I wondered what it was I wanted. I've lost a pound and a half since vacation began, so I dare to risk one."

"I haven't been buying sodas, because I needed the money for something else," said Peggy. [26] "But this is the last day of vacation and I believe I'll celebrate."

They filed in and gave their orders. Peggy had just taken the first sip of a ravishing concoction, whose formula would have given a dyspeptic heart-failure, when at the opposite counter she spied a stout, middle-aged woman who was regarding her with savage intentness. Her features were familiar, in spite of a look of hostility Peggy was not accustomed to see on the faces that looked in her direction.

For some minutes Peggy was frankly puzzled. Not till she was finishing her soda did she remember where she had seen that heavy, lowering face before. But with the recollection, she slipped from her stool and crossed to the opposite side of the room.

"I've been trying to think where I've seen you before, but now I remember. You're the Miss Potts who takes care of Mary Donaldson, aren't you?"

Rather ungraciously Miss Potts admitted her identity. She was not a trained nurse, for in Mary's case skilled hands were no longer necessary. Miss Potts was big and strong and kind of [27] heart, though at the moment her expression was far from suggesting the latter characteristic. A little puzzled by the woman's manner, Peggy continued, "I've been wanting to see Mary for ever so long. How is she?"

"Well, she ain't doing very well, and no wonder. Old folks get kind of used to the way things are in this world, and it doesn't surprise 'em none to be forgotten. But it's sort of hard on the young."

Peggy flushed hotly. She realized that Miss Potts' disagreeable manner was a deliberate expression of resentment. "I'm sorry that I haven't been able to see more of Mary this last year," she said with gentle dignity, "but I've been very busy, and it's such a long way over here."

"I s'pose it's a long way to your telephone, too."

"Telephone!" Peggy repeated. She looked at Miss Potts so blankly that Mary's caretaker had no alternative but to explain.

"Her pa had it put in for a surprise. It's right beside her bed, and the little thing it stands on [28] moves 'round, so she can talk without any trouble. He thought it would be a comfort to her, for she could chat with all her friends, and sort of keep up with things."

"Why, yes," said Peggy, feeling uncomfortable. "I should think she'd get lots of fun out of it." She was remembering that Mary had called her up—it was weeks or months, or was it fully a year before—to tell her about the new telephone. There had been an eagerness in Mary's voice

that she remembered vividly. Peggy had agreed that it was "splendid," without realizing just what this link with the outside world would mean to a girl shut out from so much.

Miss Potts indulged in an unmusical laugh. "Oh, yes," she said. "She gets lots of fun. Every now and then she gets a call. There's so many new girls on the telephone exchanges nowadays, that they're bound to give her number every little while. And then she tells 'em it's the wrong number and rings off."

Peggy's face was a study. "Do you mean that she—that no one—"

The aggressiveness suddenly disappeared from Miss Potts' manner. Her eyes filled with tears. [29]

"It's the heart-breakingest thing I ever want to see," she cried. "She was so hopeful at first. As soon as that telephone was put in, she called up everybody she knew, to tell 'em about it. And then she'd lie there smiling, watching that phone, as if it was something out of a fairy book and was going to bring her all kinds of happiness."

Peggy's imagination was a vivid one. As Miss Potts spoke, she could almost see Mary's smiling, expectant face. A pang of sympathy stabbed her tender heart.

"The very first time that telephone rang it was somebody that wanted the butcher; and the second time, a girl, who was coming over to spend the afternoon with her, rang up to say her aunt was in town and she was going to the matinée instead. I don't think Mary ever felt the same about her phone after that start-out. When it rang, she looked kind of scared, as if she was afraid she was going to hear something disappointing."

"But surely," Peggy exclaimed, "she must have lots of calls from her friends. I—why, I know I [30] haven't called very often, but that was because I was always hoping to get time to go over to see her." There was such genuine distress in her voice that Miss Potts was visibly melted.

"It's a busy world," she said, "for young folks and old folks, too, and I guess on the whole it's lucky it is so easy for us to forget. But all the same," she ended, with a shake of her head, "it's pretty hard on the ones who get forgotten."

The clerk brought out the prescription for which Miss Potts had been waiting, and Peggy rejoined her friends. For a moment she considered sending her flowers to Mary, but a fear that to Miss Potts this might seem an effort to evade a more exacting expression of sympathy led her to relinquish her purpose. Her crest-fallen manner revealed that something was wrong, and as they left the drug store her friends resentfully demanded an explanation.

"Peggy, what was that woman saying to you?" Priscilla was bristling like a mother hen who [31] sees one of her brood attacked.

In a few words Peggy explained. Her three listeners exchanged conscience-stricken glances.

"It seems rather mean that you should be the one to be scolded," said Amy, "when you have gone to see Mary oftener than all the three of us together."

"That isn't saying much," Peggy stated gloomily. "I haven't been near her for months."

"But you haven't had time," cried Ruth, slipping her hand through her friend's arm.

"No, I think I really haven't," Peggy said frankly. "But I certainly have had time to go to the telephone." Then suddenly her face brightened. "I know what we'll do, girls; we'll give her a telephone party."

"A telephone party," Amy repeated. "What do you mean by that?" The car for which they were waiting came along before Peggy could answer, and she finished her explanation hanging to a strap, while her three companions, similarly supported and swaying violently with each jerk of [32] the car, listened absorbedly.

"College opens to-morrow, and the first day is never so very busy, so we'll call Mary up every hour. My hour will be between nine and ten. Priscilla, you take the hour between ten and eleven; and Amy, you can have the next one. I think we'd better omit the hour between twelve and one, for she'll probably be eating luncheon then. Ruth, you may call between one and two."

"But you said every hour, Peggy. Don't you think it would be rather over-doing it to call twice in one day?"

"I'm going to get hold of some of the other girls who were in Mary's class in high school, Elinor Hewitt, and Anna Joyce, and Blanche Eastabrook—"

"She's in New York."

"Well, Marian O'Neil isn't. And I'll see Aimee Dubois at college and tell her about it. Mary's telephone is going to work overtime to make up for its long idleness."

"What I don't understand," said Priscilla, "is if Mary was so lonely, why didn't she call us up?" [33]

"I can understand that easy enough," replied Peggy. "She called us up to tell us she had a phone, and after that, it was our move."

"And I suppose," suggested Amy, "that there isn't a great deal to talk about, when you don't get

out of an upstairs room from one month to another."

"I suppose not," Priscilla acknowledged. Everything considered, it was a rather crest-fallen quartette of girls who returned from their afternoon's outing.

It was just half past nine next day when Mary Donaldson's telephone rang. "I'm not too early, am I?" said a cheery voice.

Mary, who had taken up the receiver with the air of uncertainty to which Miss Potts had referred, uttered a joyful exclamation. "Why, it's Peggy Raymond!"

"Yes, it's Peggy. I wanted to tell you about something perfectly killing that happened to Amy the other day." Peggy had made up her mind to ignore the months of silence. Explanations would not help matters, for nothing could explain away the fact that in the whirl and rush of their over- [34]
full lives they had, for the time being, quite forgotten Mary.

The story of Amy's impromptu dinner party proved as entertaining as Peggy had anticipated. Mary Donaldson laughed as she had not laughed for months. And in the next room Miss Potts, listening, made strange grimaces that seemed only distantly related to smiles. When the story was finished, Mary had some questions to ask. "Who are the Careys? There used to be a Carey girl in school—"

"I'm pretty sure they aren't related to her. They come from some place in New York and they've lived in our neighborhood less than a year. And do you know, Mary, we think Amy must have made quite an impression on the brother—Bob. He's called on her twice since, and he's asked her to go to the Glee Club concert."

"He has!" Romance dies hard in the heart of a girl. Poor Mary, shut away from contact with young life, was thrilled by the suggestion of an incipient love-story. "Is he nice looking?" she asked eagerly.

"Well, I've not met him yet, but I've noticed him passing several times, and I thought he was [35]
quite handsome. And Hildegarde is an awfully stylish girl, though I'd hardly call her pretty."

In ten minutes Peggy announced that she must go to a history lecture and rang off. She was smiling as she went to class, and wishing she could be an unseen listener to the conversations scheduled to take place in Mary's room every hour in the day.

As Peggy had promised, the bell of Mary's telephone worked over-time. The Friendly Terrace girls were supplemented by former school-mates in sufficient numbers to keep up the excitement till half past eight that evening. Most of the girls, whose memories Peggy had undertaken to jolt, were conscience-stricken when they realized how they had neglected Mary. And they readily fell in with Peggy's suggestion.

"Even if we can't get over there very often," urged Peggy, "we can use the telephone. Five minutes talk every few days will make Mary feel that she's in touch with us still. It doesn't seem [36]
to me I could bear feeling forgotten." Peggy did not realize that, even with Mary's disability, she would have made herself the center of some circle; and in her failure to understand that Mary's rather colorless personality was in part responsible for what had happened, Peggy was the more severe upon herself for what now seemed to her inexplicable and inexcusable neglect.

Thanks to the sudden activity of Peggy's conscience, Mary Donaldson heard more outside news in one day than she had heard in the three months previous. And as the trouble with most young people is want of thought, rather than want of heart, few of the girls were satisfied with chatting five or ten minutes over the telephone. They promised to come to see her soon. They offered to lend her books or mail her magazines. One girl suggested that she would bring over some of her victrola records for Mary to hear, and another informed her that as soon as the lilies of the valley were out she should have a cluster. All at once Mary Donaldson's friends were remembering her in earnest.

When Marian O'Neil rang off at twenty minutes of nine, Mary hesitated a moment and then [37]
called Peggy Raymond. And Peggy who was giving her studies that half-hearted attention customary on the first day after vacation, whether the student is in the primary grade or a college Junior, came running downstairs when Dick shouted her name.

"Hello—Hello—Why, Mary!" The pleasure in her tone was unmistakable, and the shut-in, two miles away, thrilled responsively.

"Peggy, I just wanted to tell you before I went to sleep that I've had such a lovely day."

"Have you, dear? I'm glad. What happened?"

The question took the guileless Mary aback. "I thought perhaps you knew something about it. My telephone has been ringing all day. It was queer if it was only a coincidence, for some girls called me up that I haven't heard from for years."

"Must have been what they call a brain wave," suggested Peggy, audaciously.

"Well, anyway, it was nice. I've heard so many things and talked with so many people that I [38]
feel as if I'd been to a party."

"If that's all, Mary, I'll prophesy there'll be just as nice days coming as this."

"Oh, do you think so, Peggy! Well, it's my bed time now, so I won't talk any longer. Good-night."

"Good-night!" And as Peggy hung up the receiver, she reflected that she had never done justice to the possibilities of the telephone.

CHAPTER III [39]

A TRIUMPH OF ART

It was one of those warm, summer-like days of early June, when lessons and college classes are forgotten in the enjoyment of thoughts of the summer vacation to come. Such a few days left, and the four girls would be free for all the reading and the tennis and the sewing and the tramping which the press of examination preparation had forced aside. And they would all be together again this summer, which gave promise of many Quartette larks. The day was so perfect that all four had, as if of one mind, discarded their lessons for the remainder of the day, and had drifted over to Amy's.

"Do you know what I've been thinking about all week?" demanded Amy of the trio occupying her front porch. She did not wait for any of them to hazard a guess, but gave the answer herself, "Strawberries."

A soft little murmur went the rounds. "We had strawberries for dinner last night," said Peggy, [40] "the best I've tasted this year."

"And we had strawberry short-cake." Priscilla smacked her lips reminiscently.

"And I had some strawberry ice cream at Birds'," put in Ruth. "It was so warm along about nine o'clock, you know, and Nelson and I went down. My, but it was good!"

Amy listened unmoved. "What I've been thinking about," she explained, "is strawberries in the patch, sticking their heads out from under the leaves, as if they were begging to be picked, warm from the sun, and sweet, and just spilling over with juice."

The girls sat attentive. Something in Amy's manner indicated that there was a background of reality for this flight of fancy.

"I've got a sort of relation living about ten miles out of town," Amy continued. "Aunt Phoebe Cummings, only that isn't her name. Five years ago she married a man named Frost."

"How interesting to get a new uncle at your age," interjected Ruth.

"I don't regard him as much of an addition to the family," retorted Amy drily. "When I talk [41] about him, I call him, 'Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back.' But to his face, he's Mr. Frost. You see, Aunt Phoebe isn't exactly an aunt. I believe she's a second cousin of my grandfather's first wife, but she's nicer than lots of real aunts."

"I do think you have the nicest relations, Amy Lassell," interposed Peggy. "Now Aunt Abigail, at Doolittle cottage, was a perfect dear."

Priscilla showed signs of impatience. "What has all this to do with strawberries?"

"Well, I'm coming to that. My Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back owns a little farm, and they've got strawberries to burn. And almost every year Aunt Phoebe says she wishes I'd come out when the strawberries are ripe and bring some of my friends."

"Amy Lassell!" exclaimed Priscilla reproachfully. "Do you mean that Mrs. Philander has been begging you to do this for the last five years, and that this is the first we've heard of it?"

"Well, as a rule she mentions it along about August, or October, and I forget it by June. But she [42] came in town to shop the other day and took dinner with us, and when she left, she broached the subject again. She said the strawberries would be at their best by the middle of next week and she'd love to meet you all. What do you think of a trip to the country along about Wednesday?"

There were certain subjects regarding which, in spite of their devoted friendship, the Friendly Terrace quartette could develop considerable diversity of opinion. But on this occasion, their unanimity would have gratified the hospitable instincts of Amy's Aunt Phoebe. Strawberries boxed and displayed in show windows, or even transformed into such delicacies as short cake and ice cream, seemed prosaic all at once. What they wanted was to be turned loose in a strawberry patch, to stain their fingers plucking the strawberries from the vines. Before leaving the porch the girls watched Amy pen a note to her relative, accepting her oft-repeated invitation in behalf of herself and friends, and suggesting the following Wednesday as a desirable time for [43] their visit.

A rather cloudy Tuesday awakened anxious apprehensions in the minds of the four girls, apprehensions dissipated, however, by the cloudless dawn of Wednesday. The height of the strawberry season is the most charming time of the year. The four ate an early luncheon at Peggy's home, and then took the trolley for the outskirts of the city. Once outside the city, the

trolley car bowled along at an exhilarating pace, and in spite of the prospects ahead, the girls were almost sorry when the ten-miles were up, and the breezy ride was ended.

Aunt Phoebe was a little old lady whose black skirt was quaintly full and showed signs of wear, partially concealed by a white ruffled apron of unusual size. She greeted them as affectionately as if they had all been nieces by adoption, and conducted them indoors to take off their hats. The living room through which they passed was large and pleasantly and immaculately neat, the unpainted floor having been scrubbed to a milky whiteness.

The tapping of the girls' heels on the boards emphasized their bareness. "Got your rugs up for [44]
the summer, I see," remarked Amy casually. The comment was natural enough under the circumstances, but unluckily it opened the door of the closet which contained the Frosts' family skeleton. Aunt Phoebe reddened as if Amy's innocent remark had been a slap in the face. "My sitting room carpet's worn out," she said. "It was worn out when I came here. I patched it and I pieced it and I made it last a good three years after anybody else would have put it in the rags, and now he says there's no sense buying a new one."

"Mr. Frost, you mean?"

"Yes. He's got awful queer notions, Philander has. He talks about bare floors being healthy. Good gracious! It gives me a chill to think of this room in November without a carpet on the floor. I've done without lots of things in my life, but I never was too poor to have my floors carpeted."

Amy was sorry she had broached the subject, for now that Aunt Phoebe was started, she
seemed to find it difficult to stop talking about her grievance. Like many people who do not ask a [45]
great deal of life, she was the more insistent regarding the few things she counted essential. The bare floor, echoing noisily under the tread of her guests, stirred her indignation and almost spoiled her childlike satisfaction in entertaining Amy and her friends.

But worse was coming. It appeared that Aunt Phoebe had a heaped glass dish of berries to be served in the conventional fashion with sugar and cream, but she suggested that first the girls might enjoy helping themselves from the patch. As this was really what they had come for, they acquiesced heartily, and Aunt Phoebe led the way. Her kindly old face lost its pensiveness as she watched the laughing girls picking the berries from the vines, their lips and fingers reddening as the feast proceeded. Then without any warning, a deep voice spoke out of the shrubbery, and only too much to the point. "The commission men," said the voice, "are paying twelve cents a box for them strawberries."

Four berry-pickers straightened themselves and looked at one another aghast. Aunt Phoebe [46]
rushed furiously to their defense. "Philander Frost, this is my niece, Amy Lassell, and she's brought out some young friends to eat strawberries, because I asked her to." Her faded blue eyes emitted electric sparks as she defied him.

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure," said Mr. Frost, still with an air of profound melancholy. "I don't grudge a few strawberries any more than the next man, but with them bringing twelve cents a box—"

"Philander!" The little wrinkled wife was fairly beside herself with mortification. Her withered skin, suffused by a burning blush, rivalled the vivid coloring of youth. "Philander, I don't care if the strawberries are a dollar a quart—"

"Oh, well," said Mr. Frost patiently. "I just thought I'd mention it." He turned away while four girls stood motionless in the strawberry patch, as if there had been a Medusa-like quality in his gaze, turning them all to stone.

"Go right on, dearies," commanded Aunt Phoebe, raising her voice defiantly, so that it should
reach the ears of her departing lord and master. "Eat all you want to." But though as a matter of [47]
principle, the girls attempted to obey, the sweetness had gone from the luscious fruit. They ate half-heartedly, ashamed to meet one another's eyes, calculating, in spite of themselves, how much Mr. Frost was out of pocket because of their visit.

Aunt Phoebe was plainly disappointed when they declared that they had had enough. She tried to encourage them to think better of it, and when they still insisted, led the way to the house. "I don't think much of strawberries without trimmings, myself," she declared over her shoulder. "When you taste them with sugar and cream, I guess you'll find your appetites coming back."

The porch at the side of the house was shaded and inviting. Aunt Phoebe insisted on their seating themselves, while she waited on them. Against the snowy covering of the small, round table, the big dish of choice berries made a fine showing. Then Aunt Phoebe brought out a pitcher of rich yellow cream, and the spirits of the crest-fallen group began to revive. The
appearance of a heaping plate-full of cookies was hailed with appreciative smiles. [48]

"Plenty more cookies in the jar," said Aunt Phoebe, helping them with lavish hand. "And plenty more berries. Eat all you can."

They had almost reached the point of forgetting Mr. Frost and his discomforting comments, when he again made his appearance. Peggy lost the thread of the story she was telling and stopped short, but as no one was listening, that made no difference.

Mr. Frost seated himself and sighed heavily. "Some folks is afraid to eat too many

strawberries," he said. "They're likely to cause a rash."

The girls, not knowing what to say, went on eating mechanically. Aunt Phoebe, however, straightened herself over her saucer. "I don't mind a rash," she announced, "not in such a good cause."

"It ain't that I care for the expense," Mr. Frost said feelingly, "though of course, with the cost of living so high, sensible folks ought to do without everything that ain't necessary. Now Phoebe's got an idea that she wants a new carpet for the sitting room—"

"I've got an idea that I'm going to have one, too," said Aunt Phoebe, breathing hard. [49]

"I tell her that bare floors is all the rage," said Mr. Frost, looking from one to another of the girls, as if he hoped to find an ally in one of them. "Carpets are hiding-places for all sorts of germs. The swellest folks there is have bare floors nowadays, I tell her."

"I guess their bare floors don't look much like mine," exploded Aunt Phoebe, "just common pine boards, not even painted."

"I wouldn't mind letting you paint 'em," said Mr. Frost. "Of course paint is very expensive these days, but if it would make you feel any better—"

"What I want," Aunt Phoebe was beginning wrathfully, when Amy interrupted. She addressed herself to Mr. Frost, and her manner was propitiatory. "A painted floor isn't so bad," she said. "Lots of folks have painted floors."

"A body's feet would freeze in winter," exclaimed Aunt Phoebe, plainly bewildered at Amy's taking sides against her.

"You want to wear good thick shoes and stockings," replied Mr. Frost, eyeing Amy approvingly. [50] His manner indicated that as far as she was concerned, he did not grudge the strawberries.

"I was going to say," continued Amy, returning his friendly gaze with interest, "that I wouldn't mind coming out and painting the floors for you some day."

The other Friendly Terrace girls looked at one another in surprise. They could not understand Amy. Apparently she was trying to curry favor with Mr. Frost by taking sides with him against Aunt Phoebe, yet none of them considered this the real explanation. Whatever her intention, it was plain that Amy had made a conquest of Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back. For the rest of their stay, he addressed most his remarks to her, and though his conversation dealt largely with the high cost of living and the necessity for thrift, their inexplicable friend seemed highly edified.

When they took their departure, Mr. Frost again brought up the subject of the floor. "If you should happen to feel like painting it some day—"

"Oh, I'm coming," said Amy smiling up at him. "I'll get the other girls to help me, and we'll [51] make short work of it."

"I think I've got pretty near enough paint left from painting the barn—"

Aunt Phoebe's accession of color suggested an attack of apoplexy, for the barn was the color of a ripe pumpkin. Amy hastily interposed, "Oh, I'll bring the paint."

"Will you now? Well, I call that the right spirit. I like to see young folks appreciative," declared Mr. Frost. "Strawberries are bringing a good price this year, but I'm sure you're welcome to every one you et."

On the way to the car Amy walked beside Aunt Phoebe, holding fast to her arm and chattering like a magpie. And as she kissed the old lady good-by, she pulled her close and whispered in her ear. It was impossible to know what she said, but Aunt Phoebe's lugubrious countenance showed an immediate improvement. She stared at Amy with an expression of incredulity which presently became a bewildered smile.

The uncertainty of the other Friendly Terrace girls, as to whether or not Amy had intended her [52] promise to be taken literally, was dissipated about a week later when she called on them to accompany her and assist in the painting of Aunt Phoebe's sitting-room floor. Thoughtlessly Amy had selected a date when Peggy had an imperative engagement. Peggy urged her to choose another day, but Amy found insuperable objections to a change.

"But I don't like this," said Peggy. "I ate as many strawberries as anybody, and if you're painting the floor to pay your uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back, I want to do my share." And to this, Amy replied imperturbably that she need not worry, for Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back would be paid in full, without her assistance.

"It really is a pity Peggy couldn't come." The trio was fairly on its way. "She knows more about such work than any of us."

"I'm afraid Peggy wouldn't be much of a help to-day," replied Amy.

"Peggy not a help? Why not?" Priscilla's manner indicated that if any criticism of Peggy were implied, she would not stand for it.

"Peggy's conscience is such a Johnny-on-the-spot," Amy explained. "It never seems to take a [53]

vacation the way ours do, and I'm afraid it would be dreadfully in the way to-day."

"Why, what do you mean?" demanded Priscilla and Ruth together.

Amy opened the little grip she carried, produced a small-sized can of paint and handed it to Priscilla. A similar one was bestowed on the perplexed Ruth, and then Amy leaned back and looked from one to the other triumphantly.

"What do you want me to do with it?" frowned Priscilla. Then with a violent start, "Why, Amy Lassell!"

"Well?"

"This paint is moss green."

"And this," cried Ruth excitedly, "is yellow."

"And in here," explained Amy, patting her bag tenderly, "are all the colors of the rainbow in half pint cans. Did you ever see an exhibition of cubist pictures?"

"Yes, once," replied Priscilla mechanically, while Ruth too amazed for words, stared dumbly at [54] her friend.

"Well, that is the way Aunt Phoebe's floor is going to look when we are through with it."

"Why, Amy," gasped Ruth, suddenly finding her voice. "You can't do anything like that. He wouldn't let you."

"He won't be there. I've arranged for Aunt Phoebe to take him off for the day. The key to the house has been left hanging on the back porch."

"Does she know?"

"She doesn't, for I thought it was best for her to be able to say she didn't know a thing about it. But she suspects that something's in the wind."

Priscilla hesitated. "I suppose your idea is—"

"My idea is to make such a looking floor that he will be only too glad to buy a carpet to cover it."

The three girls looked at one another, and then Ruth gave a little nervous giggle. After a minute Priscilla joined in. And then all three leaned back in the seats in a paroxysm of silent [55] laughter, while their fellow passengers regarded them enviously.

"Well, I don't know but you're right about Peggy," admitted Priscilla, at length, wiping her eyes. "I'm pretty sure she would not have approved."

"I think it serves him just right," declared Ruth. "I detest stingy people."

"It does serve him right," said Amy. "He has plenty of money, but he hates to part with any of it. Poor Aunt Phoebe has a little money of her own, and before she married him she got no end of fun out of doing things for other people. And now the dear old soul can't even treat her friends to strawberries without being humiliated. Anyway," concluded Amy with decision, "I'm bound she shall have a carpet for her living room next winter."

They found the farm house on the hill silent and deserted, the back door locked, and the key hanging in such plain view that it seemed an invitation to enter. Indoors they found the living room made ready against their coming. All the furniture had been moved into adjoining rooms and the floor had been given an extra and quite unnecessary scrubbing. [56]

The girls hastily arrayed themselves for the work. Priscilla and Amy had brought along the outfits they had worn as farmerettes, while Ruth donned a worn-out bathing suit. Then Amy pried off the covers of her array of cans, and presented each of her friends with a small paintbrush. The fun began.

Amy's suggestion that a striking design should be painted in the middle of the room, and at each of the four corners, was enthusiastically accepted, and Priscilla at once undertook the execution of a Chinese dragon in the corner of the room which was most in evidence to one standing in the doorway. Amy taking possession of the can of yellow paint, set herself to reproduce a sunrise in the center of the room, the yellow rays radiating from the central golden orb in the most realistic manner. Ruth, her imagination stimulated by the discovery of a can of black paint, promptly set about balancing Priscilla's dragon by a black cat in the opposite corner, its back arched like a bow, and its tail standing upright like an ebony plume.

They splashed about, admiring one another's work enthusiastically and complacently accepting [57] compliments for their own. And when the various masterpieces had been executed to the satisfaction of the artists, they fell to work filling in the remaining spaces with gaily colored rhomboids, red, yellow, green, black, and purple. Nothing more gorgeous than Aunt Phoebe's painted floor could possibly be imagined. Even the highly colored chromos on the wall paled before it. In some respects it suggested an old-fashioned crazy-quilt, though when the dragon and the black cat were taken into account, it was more like a bad case of nightmare. After the girls had finished, they withdrew to the next room and, gazing upon it, tried to imagine the sensations

of Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back when its kaleidoscopic magnificence should break upon his astonished gaze.

Suddenly they were panic-stricken for fear the occupants of the farm house should return before they had taken their departure. They dressed in such haste that they failed to get the full benefit of the bottle of turpentine Amy had brought along for cleansing purposes, and they went [58] back to town with green and purple smudges on their fingers. As soon as they had reached home, they descended on Peggy to tell her of the manner in which they had fulfilled Amy's promise, and Peggy listened with amazement tinged with admiration.

"I'm rather glad you didn't tell me, for I'm afraid I should have thrown cold water, and I can't help thinking it's exactly what Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back deserves. And if it really drives him into buying a new carpet, I shall feel satisfied that you've done the right thing."

The four girls had agreed to play tennis Saturday of that week, but early Saturday morning Amy called Peggy up to ask to be excused. "Aunt Phoebe is coming in town for some shopping," she explained, and interrupted herself by an ecstatic giggle. "And she wants me to go with her. She wants me to help her select a carpet for the sitting room."

CHAPTER IV [59]

AN AFTERNOON CALL

Priscilla sat at her little dressing table, studying her reflection in the mirror with an absorbed intentness which would have impressed nine observers out of ten as a naïve exhibition of vanity. This verdict, however, would have been most unfair. Though many people considered Priscilla a really handsome girl, she had always been inclined to be unduly modest regarding her personal appearance. Her present scrutiny was solely for the purpose of discovering the blemish which she was sure must be apparent to all beholders.

For a girl of her age, Priscilla had thought very little about the opposite sex. Her devotion to Peggy had been a sufficient outlet for her sentiment, while her contempt for those girls who could think and talk of nothing but the "boys" had, perhaps, led her to go needlessly far in the opposite direction. The youths who had fluttered mothlike about the tall, graceful girl had met [60] such a baffling indifference that they had transferred their attentions to some more responsive luminary, while Priscilla went on her way unruffled.

But this year things were different. The four Friendly Terrace chums were no longer sufficient to themselves. Peggy was engaged. Since Nelson Hallowell's return from the service, he had been a very frequent caller at Ruth's home. And on one or two occasions when Priscilla had run over to Amy's in the evening, she had found one of the porch chairs occupied by Robert Carey. Priscilla began to have a feeling of being left out, new in her experience and most unpleasant. She wondered what there was about her to differentiate her from other girls. She studied her reflection, dreading yet half expecting to see some flaw which would inevitably repel the beholder.

On this particular afternoon as Priscilla faced herself in the glass and tried to discover the defects that kept admirers at a distance, affairs had reached a crisis. The University Field Day had long been a thrilling occasion to many of the young people of the city, not merely because of [61] their interest in the various events, but because it was customary for each of the young fellows who attended to ask some girl to accompany him. Priscilla had taken it for granted that Peggy would go with Graham, and was not surprised to learn that Nelson had been promised the pleasure of Ruth's company on the important occasion. But when she had suggested to Amy that they should go together, and Amy after a moment's hesitation had replied, "Why, the fact is, Priscilla, Bob Carey has asked me to go with him," Priscilla was conscious of a distinct shock. Her subsequent dejection had nothing to do with the prospect of missing Field Day. But when she asked herself if she were really the least attractive girl in the world, she could see no escape from an affirmative answer.

It was while she sat there, heavy-hearted and vaguely resentful, that the maid brought up a card, one of those small, inobtrusive slips of cardboard which proclaim the modesty of the socially inclined male. Priscilla took it, impressed in spite of herself. Though she was old enough [62] to have become accustomed to such little conventions, the life of a college girl is so necessarily informal that few people who came to see Priscilla announced their presence in this fashion. And this was the first time a young man had sent up his card to Priscilla.

"Mr. Horace Endicott Hitchcock," read Priscilla, and if the truth be told, she was conscious of an undefined disappointment. She had known Horace Hitchcock for a dozen years, ever since a smug little boy in a velvet suit, he had attended the children's parties which were her earliest social dissipations. As he was about three years older than Priscilla she had admired him extremely in those days when the velvet suit was much in evidence. But her attitude had altered long before she had considered herself too old to play dolls.

Horace's boyhood had been a trying period. He had never had a boy friend, the lads of his own age agreeing with contemptuous unanimity that he was a "sissy." Perhaps for the same reason,

the girls had found him as little appealing. But as he neared his majority, Horace had blossomed into a belated popularity. He was somewhat effeminate as far as his appearance went. He talked [63] very rapidly, and used more gestures than is customary with young Americans. Horace dressed in excellent taste, and was somewhat of an authority on shirts and ties and matters equally important. Although he was supposed to be an insurance solicitor, he was never too occupied to attend any social affair at any hour of the day, and this gave him an advantage over the young men who were on duty till five o'clock or later. Priscilla had seen very little of him since she had entered college, and now as she looked at his card she only wondered if he had come to ask her to play for some entertainment.

Priscilla gave a last dissatisfied glance at her reflection in the glass, captured a stray lock with a hairpin, and went downstairs. Sensible girl as she was, she found herself impressed by Horace's greeting. He bowed very low over her hand, like the hero of a picture play, and drew up a chair for her with great elegance of manner. To a girl suffering from lack of proper self-esteem, his air of deference was peculiarly soothing. Yet even then, it never occurred to Priscilla that this was a [64] social call. She listened to Horace's voluble talk, made such replies as seemed necessary, noted approvingly the perfect fit of his light suit, and the fact that his tie matched his silk socks, and waited patiently for him to come to the point.

Something like twenty minutes had passed when Priscilla reached a realizing sense of the situation. All at once, while Horace was describing minutely the country house where he had spent the previous week-end, Priscilla gave a little start and colored high. It had just dawned upon her that Horace had not come upon any utilitarian errand, that he was there for the sole purpose of seeing her. It took her a little time to adjust herself to the novel idea, and if Horace had asked her a point-blank question during the interval, she would not have known whether to answer yes or no, for she had not the least idea what he was talking about.

Then Priscilla waked up. She exerted herself to be charming. She talked almost as fluently as Horace himself. She laughed delightedly at his little jests; though, if the truth be told, Horace's [65] humor was decidedly anemic. She listened raptly to his stories of his achievements, and was ready with the expected admiring smile when the time arrived. A curious sense of unreality possessed her. She felt as if she were taking part in an exciting game.

"Miss Priscilla," said Horace suddenly, "are you at all interested in Field Day?"

"It's not so bad when one knows the men," Priscilla replied, and the answer showed the effect of Horace's influence in a little over half an hour. For Priscilla adored Field Day. When she watched the various events her heart pounded as if she herself were taking part in the hundred yard dash. At the close of an exciting race, she had often found herself on her feet, shrieking spasmodically, and waving her handkerchief, and feeling the smart of tears in her strained eyes. But instinctively Priscilla knew that Horace would not consider Field Day a legitimate cause for excitement, and so she answered as she did.

"Sometimes I find it a deuce of a bore," Horace said. "The crowd and the noise, don't you [66] know. But if you are willing to accompany me next Friday, Miss Priscilla, I'm sure this Field Day will prove a delightful exception."

"Oh, thank you," Priscilla said carelessly. "I should enjoy going very much." Her nonchalant acceptance of the invitation gave no idea of her tumultuous excitement. She was no longer the odd one of the quartette of chums. She was no longer left out. Her misgivings regarding herself were instantaneously set at rest, for she knew that, had she been as unattractive as she had feared, Horace Hitchcock would never have invited her to accompany him on such an occasion. Her pulses throbbed, and there was a humming in her ears as she chattered on without any clear idea of what she was saying.

Priscilla's feeling of elation had nothing to do with Horace's personality. Had he been any other young man, equally well dressed and well mannered, she would have felt exactly the same. Yet under the circumstances she experienced a not unreasonable sense of gratitude. She shut her eyes to the little affectations of manner which ordinarily she would have found amusing. She [67] refused to acknowledge to herself that Horace was bragging. She had never liked him, and the Horace who had invited her to the Field Day exercises was in all essentials the Horace of the velvet suit; yet now, if she had heard him criticized, she would have rushed impetuously to his defense. In short, Priscilla was started on a course which many an older and wiser woman has followed to disaster.

Priscilla was in no hurry to mention the fact that she expected to be a spectator of the Field Day events. The very intensity of her previous qualms made her the more inclined to treat the present situation nonchalantly. On Thursday evening, however, she remarked casually to Peggy that she hoped their seats would not be too far separated. Peggy looked up in pleased surprise.

"Are you going, Priscilla? I'm awful glad. Who's taking you?"

"Horace Hitchcock."

"Horace Hitchcock!" Peggy repeated the name in such accents of astonishment that Priscilla [68] flushed. "Why not?" she asked rather coldly.

"I didn't know you saw anything of him."

"I've known him as long as I've known you—almost as long as I've known anybody."

"Why, of course, Priscilla. I remember when we used to see him at parties in a Fauntleroy suit. But I've lost track of him for an age and I thought you had, too, that's all." There was an underlying astonishment in Peggy's apology. She could not understand Priscilla's seeming readiness to take offense. And when Priscilla began to talk of something quite different, Peggy realized with fresh amazement that the peculiarities of Horace Hitchcock were, for the present, a tabooed topic between them.

CHAPTER V [69]
THE RUMMAGE SALE

SUMMER vacation! Although the Field Day exercises, and the few Commencement festivities to which undergraduates are invited, were only four days past, classes and lessons seemed to the Quartet never to have existed; or if so, only in a dream. And it would be the same way when college began again in the fall. Summer, of a few days before, would be a dim memory of the past.

Though they had not heard from their examinations, they all felt reasonably confident of having passed successfully. At any rate, they had put the thought of them resolutely out of mind, following Peggy's, "one thing at a time, and when it's done, it doesn't do any good worrying about it." Those four days had been devoted to concentrated doing nothing.

"'DULCE FAR NIENTE' is such a pretty phrase it makes a virtue of loafing," said Priscilla.

And to this, for the time being, the other three agreed. [70]

It was indirectly through Horace Hitchcock that the Friendly Terrace girls became interested in the Rummage Sale. For at the Field Day exercises Horace and Priscilla had happened to occupy seats in the Grand Stand next to Mrs. Sidney Vanderpool, and Horace, who seemed a prime favorite with that influential lady, had introduced Priscilla. Mrs. Vanderpool was in charge of a rummage sale to be held for the benefit of a local charity, and recognizing Priscilla's efficiency at a glance, she had promptly enlisted her under her banner. Since whatever concerned one of the Friendly Terrace quartette concerned all, Mrs. Vanderpool in securing Priscilla's coöperation had gained four new assistants.

It was Peggy, strange to say, whose enthusiasm it was hardest to kindle. "Somehow I never thought much of rummage sales," she owned. "Perhaps it is because *rummage* always reminds me of *rubbish*."

"But that's not fair, Peggy," Priscilla remonstrated. "Every family has a lot of things packed [71] away that would be a blessing to people a little poorer."

Peggy reflected. "I can't think of anything we could spare that would be much of a blessing to any one."

"You haven't looked your things over with that thought in mind. Take Mrs. Vanderpool, for instance. Why, she'd discard a piece of furniture we would be proud to put in the parlor. A chair or sofa we'd think too shabby to have around would seem magnificent to your friends, the Bonds."

"I suppose there's something in that," owned Peggy.

"Of course there is. Thanks to the rummage sales, people get rid of a lot of stuff that's no further good to them; and other people get a great many things that they can use, and pay almost nothing for them."

"If they pay so little, why does Mrs. Vanderpool expect to make such a lot of money!" demanded Peggy.

"Look at the five-and-ten cent stores. Little profits count up, if you make sales enough. And in a [72] rummage sale the expenses are so small that almost everything is profit."

Peggy began to think that her prejudice had been unreasonable, and she hunted the house over to find something worth contributing. But her search was far from satisfactory to herself. Mrs. Raymond was not one of the house-keepers who make a practice of hoarding useless articles. If a piece of furniture broke down, she had it mended if it were worth repairing; if not, she either gave it to some poor family who could make use of it, or else had it carted away by the rubbish collector. When Peggy's exhaustive search ended, she had succeeded in collecting for the sale only a few pieces of crockery and a carpet-sweeper which had outlived its halcyon days, though still capable of picking threads off the carpet.

The sale was to be held in a large vacant store in the down-town district, and was to last three days. All contributors had been asked to send their offerings several days in advance, and the Friendly Terrace girls, with a score of others, were on hand to assist in classifying the articles as they arrived, and were arranging them so as to make the best possible showing. As Peggy worked [73] with the others, she was conscious of a return of her former misgivings. Undoubtedly among the contributions arriving by the wagon load there were many articles which would be useful to some

one, but Peggy wondered who would be able to make use of the cracked pitchers and leaky kitchen utensils which were coming in such quantities. She looked disapprovingly at the loads of worn-out finery, displayed on the clothing table. In her opinion people who would buy second-hand evening dresses ought not to afford any. Of the flimsy evening frocks, most of them cut excessively low, some were spotted and soiled, while others were torn and generally bedraggled. Peggy made up her mind that under no circumstances would she be a saleswoman at that table.

The array of bric-a-brac aroused similar qualms. Looking the collection over, Peggy wondered at the things people had once regarded as ornamental. And even though they now realized their error, and were glad to rid themselves of these offenses against good taste, it seemed to Peggy [74] rather hard that they should encourage the unenlightened to purchase such monstrosities under the mistaken notion that they were beautifying their homes. She was glad to turn to the book table where, if nowhere else, really worth-while bargains were offered. There were piles of the best magazines, many of them with the leaves uncut. There were odd volumes of classic writers, the most of which seemed in excellent condition. Peggy set herself to make the book table as inviting as possible, in hopes that the sales would be gratifying.

But while her original misgivings had returned in full force, Peggy said nothing about them. As far as she could see, they were unshared by any person present. The three girls who were her most intimate friends were working away enthusiastically, their bright faces unclouded by a doubt. Peggy had been a little startled by the discovery that Amy had deliberately left her out of the plot for painting Aunt Phoebe's sitting-room floor. It led her to wonder if perhaps she was over-particular.

"No one else seems to see anything out of the way," Peggy reflected. "It seems as if it must be [75] all right, if I'm the only one who thinks it isn't. Oh, dear, I hope I'm not getting so critical and fussy that I imagine that things are wrong when they're not." Again her thoughts turned to Aunt Phoebe's painted floor. If Amy had asked her coöperation, she would have refused, and would have done her best to dissuade Amy from her reckless scheme. But the results had been all that could be desired. Aunt Phoebe had her new carpet, and was radiantly happy, while Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back had undoubtedly been taught a lesson he sorely needed. Strange to say, he did not seem to hold any grudge against Amy for taking sides against him. Amy, who had been out to admire the new carpet, reported that he had received her without any display of animosity, and unprotestingly had allowed Aunt Phoebe to serve her with ice cream. "It must be that I'm getting too particular," thought Peggy. "This time I won't say a word."

She broke her resolution, however, when the committee, who had been delegated to mark the prices of each article, set to work. Peggy had comforted herself by recalling Priscilla's assurance [76] that everything would be sold at prices almost too small to mention. Instead, it seemed to the astonished Peggy that a good price was set on articles which from her standpoint were quite valueless. "O, don't you think that is too much?" She could not help exclaiming as one of the committee attached a price card to a three legged chair, which kept an upright position only by balancing itself against a rickety table.

The lady smiled upon her. "We'll have the prices rather high the first day," she replied. "Of course we want to make all we can. Then we'll reduce them for the second day, and on the third we'll take anything we can get."

Peggy did not return the smile. She was perplexed and troubled. She was beginning to realize that though these women were working for charity, they knew very little about the practical problems of the poor. She looked at the three-legged chair and wondered what she would do if she saw some reckless mother of a family preparing to squander real money on anything so worthless.

Although Peggy had expressed a wish to be stationed at the book table, Mrs. Vanderpool had [77] insisted on placing her among the household furnishings. "You've got such a winning way, my dear," she said, "and you would be wasted on the books. Nobody buys books at a rummage sale except the people who would buy them anyway. I'm expecting great things from that persuasive tongue of yours." Peggy blushed guiltily, even while she smiled. She was glad Mrs. Vanderpool had such a complimentary idea of her persuasive powers and hoped she would not disappoint her.

From the hour of its opening, the rummage sale was crowded. Peggy's heart went out to the women who came pouring in as soon as the doors were opened to the public. Many of them had a distinctly foreign look. They came hatless, holding their money tightly, and looking about them with sharp, dark eyes in search of the bargains they coveted. In the evening the shop girls and factory workers were out in full force, and Peggy noticed uneasily how inevitably they gravitated toward the cast-off finery which had aroused her disapproval. She turned her back that she might [78] not be a witness to the thriving business she suspected that department of doing.

But resolving to allow events to take their course without a protest, Peggy had failed to reckon with her inborn inability to shirk responsibility. The formula which acts as a sedative to so many consciences, "It's none of my business," had never proved effective in her case. And though she stuck to her resolution on the first day, the developments of the second proved too much for her. It was late on that afternoon when she noticed a flutter at one of the adjacent counters, and discovered to her astonishment, that the occasion of the excitement was an acquaintance of her own, no other than the husband of Elvira Bond.

Peggy had always felt a certain responsibility for Elvira, due to the fact that she had known the good-natured, slatternly girl ever since she could remember. Mrs. Bond had done the Raymonds' washing, off and on for many years, less because of her excellence as a laundress, than because she needed the work. Then Elvira had grown up, and taken her mother's place at the wash-tubs. [79]
The year of America's entry into the war she had unexpectedly married a young man considerably above her in the social scale, who had immediately been called to the colors.

Elvira's romance had been her awakening. To Peggy's attentive ear she had confided her dawning aspirations. "Joe likes things neat and clean," she explained, a little wistfulness in her voice. "Not cluttered up the way Ma keeps 'em. And I'd hate to make him ashamed of me."

"Of course you would," Peggy had cried. "And there's not a bit of need, Elvira. Why, of course you can keep your house as nice as anybody's. All you've got to do is to make up your mind that you will."

In the absence of the young husband Peggy had a watchful eye on Elvira. She had done her best to keep alive the girl's newly awakened ambitions, in spite of the discouraging home atmosphere. And after Joe's return she had frequently gone to see Elvira in the little home the young couple had purchased, and were paying for on the installment plan. In view of the girl's [80]
bringing up, it is hardly surprising that she had her relapses; but on the whole, Peggy was proud of her. Elvira worked hard, was developing a commendable thrift, and was extremely proud of her little home and of her baby.

It was at one of the bric-a-brac tables that Peggy discovered Elvira's husband, and he seemed, as far as she could judge from his manner and the manner of the women who were calling his attention to one thing after another, on the point of investing largely in the heterogeneous collection. But he happened to look over his shoulder in Peggy's direction, recognized her instantly, and came toward her, his face irradiated by a broad smile.

"Afternoon, Miss Peggy," he exclaimed. "I'm looking around. I'm thinking of buying a few little things to take home to the wife." He slapped his pocket. "It's pay-day, Miss Peggy, and the best ain't none too good for Elvira and the kid, I'll swear it ain't."

Peggy looked at him silently. It was the era of prohibition, yet an unmistakable odor radiated from Joe's person and confirmed the suspicion aroused by his unnatural manner. Peggy's heart [81]
sank.

All unconscious of her dismay, Joe was examining her stock. "What's that, Miss Peggy?" He indicated by a gesture the object which had aroused his interest.

"That is a churn, Joe."

"Fine! Fine! I've been wanting a churn ever since I got married. What's the damage?"

"But you can't want a churn, Joe; you don't keep a cow."

"No telling, Miss Peggy, I might buy a cow 'most any day." But his vacillating attention went to a battered table and he gave it a seemingly close examination. "I'll take it, Miss Peggy," he declared with a wave of his hand, "Just the thing for our front room."

"Why, Joe, Elvira has a table for the front room already."

"Can't have too much of a good thing, you know," grinned Joe. "Say I like the looks of that." Peggy's eyes followed his extended finger and she frowned. "Why, Joe, that's a coffee urn, and it wouldn't be suitable for a small family. Besides, it leaks."

"I'm bound to take home something, Miss Peggy," snickered Joe. "Nothing small about me. My [82]
pockets are pretty well lined, and you'll find me a good customer."

"Joe," said Peggy desperately, "Listen to me. You don't want any of this stuff in your pretty little home. It's not good enough."

"I guess I know what I want."

"No, Joe. You must excuse me, but to-day you don't know what you want. If you were quite yourself you'd never think of taking Elvira home a rickety table or a churn."

"You mean to tell me that I'm drunk." Joe's manner had lost its suavity. His eyes flashed as he regarded her.

"No, Joe, you're not drunk, but you've been drinking and you're not yourself. And I know by to-morrow you'll feel awfully sorry if you have carried a lot of rubbish into your dear little home."

For a moment Joe wavered between amiability and anger. His masculine pride was touched by the implication that he did not know his own mind, and alcohol had quickened his propensity to take offense. But on the other hand, there was something disarming in the way Peggy spoke of [83]
his wife and his home, and her smile was appealing. Mrs. Vanderpool had counted on her winning way and it was as effective as she had hoped, though Peggy did not apply it exactly as she had expected of her.

After a moment's hesitation, Joe capitulated. "I guess you're right, Miss Peggy. When a fellow's had a few drinks, most anything looks like a bargain. Guess this is a lot of junk."

"There's nothing here that you and Elvira want, I'm sure of that, Joe."

"Good-by, Miss Peggy."

"Good-by, Joe. Tell Elvira I'll be over to see her very soon."

Peggy drew a breath of relief when she saw Joe leave the building. But her congratulatory mood was not to last. For not long after Joe's departure, she became aware of Mrs. Vanderpool at her elbow.

"Well, you had a profitable customer at last," smiled the lady. "Wanted to buy you out, didn't he?"

The possibility of evasion did not occur to Peggy. She lifted her frank eyes. "He talked about [84] buying a lot of useless things," she answered, "but of course I wouldn't let him. You see, he'd been drinking and he didn't really know what he wanted. And besides, I know his wife."

The blank expression with which Mrs. Vanderpool regarded her made plain the impossibility of their ever coming to an understanding. Peggy started to go on, and then lapsed into silence, realizing the uselessness of further explanations. Mrs. Vanderpool having relieved her mind by a long stare, turned majestically away, and Peggy heard her a little later, talking animatedly of some one who, it appeared, was totally lacking in the business instinct. Peggy thought she could come very near guessing the identity of the person referred to. But as she went on pointing out to possible purchasers the flaws in her wares, she made up her mind that the chance of being over-particular in matters of right and wrong was very trifling compared with the danger of not being particular enough.

CHAPTER VI [85]

PRISCILLA HAS A SECRET

PEGGY was worried about Priscilla. For the first time in their years of intimacy she could not understand her friend; and worst of all, it seemed out of the question to discuss the situation and come to an understanding.

"Do you think she can like him?" Peggy asked the other Friendly Terrace girls despairingly. "Because he's always seemed to me almost a joke. I don't know how I could bear to have Priscilla fall in love with a man I wanted to laugh at."

Though both girls would have been glad to reassure her, an ominous silence followed her outbreak. "There's no accounting for tastes," said Ruth at length, a suggestion of superiority in her tone.

"Priscilla ought to have a good talking to," exclaimed Amy. "She's got plenty of sense, and to think of her letting Horace Hitchcock hang around! I'd like to tell her—" [86]

"You mustn't, Amy," Peggy interrupted. "It would never do to let her know how you feel about it. That's one of the things that make me so anxious—she's so awfully touchy on the subject of Horace. She won't have him criticized."

Peggy had valiantly done her best to cultivate a liking for Horace Hitchcock. Since the fatal Field Day when he had acted as Priscilla's escort, his attentions had been unremitting. He had called several times a week. He had brought Priscilla flowers and boxes of candy, to say nothing of books of poems, from which he had read aloud to her by the hour. Peggy, assuming that since Priscilla was seeing so much of Horace, he must be quite a different person from what she supposed, had invited him to her home along with the others of her little circle, only to find it would not do. Horace and the others would not mix any more than oil and water.

"For Heaven's sake, don't ask that Hitchcock here again," Graham implored Peggy, after an evening that had been a failure, socially considered. "He puts on airs as if he were the Prince of [87] Wales—no, that's not fair to the prince. But Hitchcock is a snob and a sissy and he makes me tired."

"But if Priscilla likes him, Graham—"

"She can't," Graham had argued, not unreasonably. "She must see through him just as the rest of us do; and even while she's so pleasant to him, she must be laughing in her sleeve."

But reasonable as Graham's stand had seemed, Priscilla was in no mood to laugh at Horace Hitchcock. Indeed, she was deliberately shutting her eyes to his weaknesses, and holding before herself such an idealized likeness of the real Horace that no one but herself would have recognized it. Horace's attentions flattered her vanity. Every call helped to reassure her anxiety in the matter of her own attractiveness. Moreover, Priscilla was a little dazzled by Horace's seeming familiarity with the people whose names were chronicled in the society columns of the daily paper. She had seen for herself that Mrs. Sidney Vanderpool regarded him with favor, and Horace had been at some pains to let her know that other ladies, some of them young and [88] beautiful, held him in equally high esteem. That he should leave girls, who could not go to New York for a week without the fact brought to the public attention in the daily papers, in order that

he might spend his evenings with her, gave Priscilla an intoxicating sense of power.

But foolish as this all was, worse was to come, and all because Amy disregarded Peggy's prudent counsel. Peggy had discovered an undue sensitiveness in Priscilla, where Horace was concerned, and had been sensible enough to perceive that any criticism of her ardent admirer, instead of prejudicing Priscilla against him, was likely to have the opposite effect. It hardly need be said that Amy did not flout Peggy's advice, but in the course of a conversation with Priscilla she lost her temper and subsequently her head.

It began with a most amiable intention on Amy's part. "Is Horace coming up to-night?" she asked Priscilla, as the two strolled along the Terrace in the hazy hush of a summer afternoon.

"I—I shouldn't be surprised to see him," owned Priscilla, with a becoming blush. [89]

"Bob telephoned me this morning that he'd be up. If Horace comes, bring him over and I'll try to get Peggy and Ruth—"

"Shall you ask Nelson Hallowell?" Priscilla inquired, a reservation in her tone which Amy did not understand.

"I'll tell Ruth to bring him if he comes, and he's pretty sure to be on hand," laughed Amy. "He's making up for the chances he missed when he was in the service."

"Then I'm afraid we can't come," said Priscilla. "Horace thinks Bob Carey is fine, and he rather likes Graham, but he draws the line at Nelson."

Amy stopped short, her plump face crimson. "Please tell me what you mean by his drawing the line?"

"Well, Amy, I've no doubt that Nelson is a very fine fellow, as far as morals go, but his social position, you know—"

"What about it?" As the two girls were standing side by side, it was quite unnecessary for Amy to speak so loudly. Her defiant tone seemed to challenge the entire block. [90]

"Hush, Amy. I'm not deaf. Of course Nelson comes from quite an ordinary family, and he's only a clerk, and Horace really doesn't care to meet him socially."

Amy burst into an angry laugh. "Horace Hitchcock said that. What a joke!"

"I don't quite understand you, Amy." Priscilla spoke with extreme frigidity.

"Why, there's enough in Nelson Hallowell's little finger to make several Horaces. To think of that dandified little manikin's turning up his nose at a fellow like Nelson."

"Amy Lassell, how dare you?"

"Oh, fudge, Priscilla, you know perfectly well what Horace Hitchcock is, and you needn't pretend to admire him, for I know better."

"I won't listen to you any longer," cried Priscilla furiously, "slandering my friends." She turned abruptly and crossed the street. The two girls continued on their homeward way with the width of the Terrace between them, each looking steadily ahead, ignoring the other's presence.

Before Amy reached home she was sorry. She saw she had been wrong as well as right. Her [91] whole-hearted championship of Nelson had not necessitated sneering at Horace. Amy realized that Priscilla had good reason to be angry, and resolved on a whole-hearted apology next day.

It was a pity she had not followed up her feeling of penitence by immediate action, for when Horace came that evening he found Priscilla in an unwonted mood. She had dramatized the whole affair to herself. Everyone was unjust to Horace. Even Peggy allowed her childish prejudices to influence her unwarrantedly. But she herself was Horace's friend and she would be loyal to that friendship, cost what it might.

A few minutes after his arrival Horace suggested a walk in the neighboring park, which had been so little "improved" that walking through it was almost like strolling along country lanes. Though the night was warm, most of the populace preferred the movies, and Horace and Priscilla had the park practically to themselves. The night wind sighed languorously through the trees. [92] The air was full of ineffable fragrances.

"Oh, Priscilla," exclaimed Horace suddenly, and caught her hand. It seemed to Priscilla that her heart stood still. There was a note in Horace's voice she had never heard before. She was sure that something wonderful was happening. And the irritating part was that she could not do justice to it, for she kept thinking of something else. She should, she was sure, be entirely absorbed in what Horace was going to say; and right at that moment, she wondered if Ruth and Nelson were sitting on Amy's porch.

"Oh, Priscilla," Horace was murmuring, "Do you not feel as I do, that we have met and loved before? You were mine, Priscilla, when the pyramids were building. You were mine in Babylon. Tell me that you have not forgotten. Tell me that you love me."

It was only about half an hour from that impassioned speech before they were walking home decorously along the lighted streets, but Priscilla had a feeling as if she had been away for

months and months. An unbelievable thing had happened. She was engaged. It was understood [93]
that the engagement was not to be mentioned at present, not even to Priscilla's father and mother. Horace had said something to the effect that to let outsiders into their secret would bruise the petals of the flower of love, and she had agreed to the postponement of that catastrophe, without asking herself why the flower of love should be so fragile. But the fact remained that she was the second of the quartette to become engaged, and she took a rather foolish satisfaction in the realization. She made up her mind that her former qualms as to her own unattractiveness were without foundation, for otherwise a social favorite like Horace would never have asked her to marry him.

Priscilla's father and mother were on the porch when the young people reached home, and, as it was much too warm to stay indoors, the evening which had contained so thrilling an episode ended rather tamely. Mr. Combs and Horace exchanged ideas on local politics, and Mrs. Combs and Horace expressed themselves on the subject of the weather. Priscilla had nothing to say on either interesting topic. She was trying to realize that some day, instead of saying "Mr. Combs" [94]
and "Mrs. Combs," Horace would be addressing her parents as "father" and "mother." This seemed so extraordinary that she was almost inclined to believe that she had dreamed the whole thing, though the significantly tender pressure of Horace's fingers, as he said good-night, assured her to the contrary.

Priscilla slept very poorly that night. Her dreams were troubled. And each time she woke, which was on the average of once an hour, she had a dreadful sense of impending disaster. On each occasion it took her several minutes to convince herself that nothing was wrong, that instead she was a very fortunate and happy girl, singled out of the world of girls by a most unusual young man. And thus reassured, she would drop off to sleep, to start again with troubled dreams, and to go again through the whole program.

Owing to her restless night, Priscilla overslept and had to dress in a hurry to avoid being late to breakfast. By expedition she reached the dining room just after her mother had seated herself. [95]
Her father followed a half minute later, and leaning over her mother's chair kissed her cheek. "Know what day it is?"

"Of course, silly," laughed Mrs. Combs. "But I'm astonished to hear that you do."

Smiling broadly, Mr. Combs went around the table and took his seat. "We should have planned a celebration," he remarked.

"What, and advertise our advanced age!" exclaimed his wife in mock consternation.

"That's so," owned Mr. Combs with a chuckle. "I remember when a silver wedding seemed to me significant of extreme age. What do you think, daughter, of having parents old enough to have been married twenty-five years?"

Then Priscilla knew what was the matter with her. She thought of sitting opposite Horace Hitchcock twice a day, year in and year out, for a quarter of a century, and her heart turned sick within her. All at once she knew how his affections of manner would grate on one who watched them for twenty-five years. He had a way of raising his eye-brows and pursing his mouth which, [96]
she was convinced, would drive her frantic in course of time. And then her relentless common-sense, awake at last, went on to assure her that the Horace Hitchcock who had made love to her in the park the previous evening was in all essentials the smug, vain little boy nobody liked. She watched her father and mother exchanging smiles and knew that such good comradeship between Horace and herself was unthinkable. She doubted if there would be a smile left in her after twenty-five years of his society.

"You look tired this morning, Priscilla," said Mr. Combs. "And I can't say I wonder. That admirer of yours makes me rather—"

"He's a very pleasant boy, I'm sure," interrupted Mrs. Combs hastily, "though I wish his manners were just a little simpler. But he always looks so neat that it's refreshing to the eye. And by the way, dear, I think you had better see your tailor and get samples for your fall suit. You've got to the point where you must have something."

Priscilla did not notice her mother's dextrous changing of the subject. She was too absorbed in [97]
looking ahead twenty-five weary years. Of course, in view of her discovery, the only sensible thing to do was to get in touch with Horace, and tell him that the lady with whom he had been on such friendly terms in Babylon was an entirely different person. But that sane and simple way of escape never occurred to Priscilla. She had given her word. She must stand by it, no matter what it cost.

Amy came over about eleven o'clock, looking very penitent. "Priscilla," she said, "I don't blame you a bit for getting angry yesterday. I'm ashamed of what I said. Of course," added Amy, her natural candor getting the better of her, "Horace Hitchcock doesn't appeal to me, but that doesn't excuse me for calling him a manikin, and you have a right to choose your friends to please yourself."

Priscilla's acceptance of this apology took Amy by surprise. She dropped her head on her visitor's shoulder—as Priscilla was tall and Amy was short, this was a feat requiring considerable dexterity—and burst into tears.

CHAPTER VII

THE FRIENDLY TERRACE ORPHANAGE

[98]

PRISCILLA'S engagement, instead of interrupting her intimacy with her chums on Friendly Terrace, seemed to intensify it. Up to the night that she had walked with Horace in the park, and he had claimed her on the score of an affection dating back to Babylon, Priscilla had rather enjoyed informing Peggy and others that she would be unable to join in their plans for the evening, as she was expecting a caller. But now all this was changed. Instead, when Horace called up to suggest coming out, he was very likely to hear that his sweetheart of Babylonian days had an imperative engagement with Peggy, or Ruth, or Amy, or more probably with all three.

It was after an evening spent at a moving picture house that Peggy made a suggestion destined to have more momentous results than she dreamed. They had gone early to avoid the crowd [99] which a popular film is likely to draw even in the warmest weather, and at nine o'clock they were occupying chairs on Peggy's porch, and discussing the heat. "How about ice cream?" inquired Amy, fanning herself with a magazine some one had left in the hammock.

Before any one could answer, Peggy had interposed with her astonishing suggestion. "Girls, I move we adopt a French orphan."

Amy forgot her interest in ice cream. "A French orphan," she gasped, "What for?"

"Well, there are plenty of reasons from the orphan's standpoint, and several from ours, it seems to me. Do you know we're getting extravagant."

"Oh, Peggy," Ruth reproached her. "Why, as far as clothes go, I never got along with so few in my life."

"I didn't say we were extravagant in clothes. But do you know, we're getting to spend lots of money for little, no-account things. How many nights this week have we been to a movie?"

The question was a rhetorical one, as Peggy knew the answer as well as any one. But [100] nevertheless Amy replied, "We've been three times, but one night the boys took us."

"It costs just as much, no matter who pays. There are four of us; and at twenty-five cents apiece, that makes a dollar an evening. Three dollars a week for movies, just for us four."

"Goodness," exclaimed Amy in as astonished a tone as if this very simple arithmetical calculation had been beyond her. "That does seem a lot."

"And that's not all," continued Peggy. "We've had ice cream, or ice cream soda, or something of the sort, at least three times this week, and these days you can't go near a soda fountain for less than fifteen cents, and you're more likely to pay twenty or twenty-five. If we call our bill two dollars, that's putting it pretty low. Five dollars, altogether."

"That *is* too much, Peggy," Priscilla agreed. "Unless you stop to count up, you wouldn't believe how much you can spend and all the time think you've been economical. But why the French orphan?"

"Well, it's awfully hard work saving by main strength, and it's easy enough if you have [101] something to save for. If I happen to feel hungry for ice cream—"

Amy groaned. "Don't!" she said in a hollow voice. "If we're not going to have any, for pity's sake don't talk about it."

Peggy heartlessly ignored her friend's protest. "If I'm hungry for ice cream, it doesn't do me much good to tell myself that I had a dish night before last. I'll just think, 'Oh, well, what's twenty-five cents!' But if I'm saving up for something, it's a different matter. We found that out when we were paying for our Liberty Bonds."

"Won't it cost a great deal to adopt an orphan?" asked Ruth doubtfully.

"Why, we won't have to pay all its expenses. But there are lots of French children left without fathers and mothers, who have some relative who can give them a home if they have a little extra to help them out. I think forty dollars will do it."

"Forty dollars a year?" Amy exclaimed in amazement.

"I'm pretty sure that's it. Mrs. Alexander was talking to me about it just the other day, and I'm [102] certain she said forty dollars."

"Then let's adopt an orphan right away," cried Amy. "And we'll have money enough left for sodas."

"Why, of course I didn't mean we should give up all our good times," Peggy exclaimed. "Only it seemed to me we were getting a little too extravagant. Then if you all agree, I think I'll go and telephone Mrs. Alexander that we'll take an orphan. She's worried because people aren't as interested as they ought to be."

It was while Peggy was at the telephone that a small girl appeared, carrying a large bundle.

"I've brought home Mrs. Raymond's dress," she said shyly, looking from one to another of the occupants of the porch.

"Mrs. Raymond isn't home, but Miss Peggy is. She's telephoning now, but she'll be out in a minute," said Priscilla.

"You'd better sit down and rest while you wait for her," suggested Ruth kindly, pushing forward a porch rocking-chair. The small girl accepted the invitation and looked smaller than ever in the capacious depths of the big chair.

Peggy came out beaming. "Mrs. Alexander is perfectly delighted, girls. She says—Why, hello, Myrtle!" [103]

"Hello, Miss Peggy," returned the girl with the bundle. "I brought home your mother's dress. Aunt Georgie couldn't get it finished any earlier."

"Mother gave you up for to-night, Myrtle. She left at eight o'clock, but I think I know where she put the money."

Peggy's conjecture proved correct. She brought out the amount of the dressmaker's bill, and having counted it before Myrtle's eyes, she folded the bills carefully and stuffed them into Myrtle's diminutive pocket book. "Shall you be glad when school opens, Myrtle?" she asked pleasantly.

"I'm not going to school any more, Miss Peggy."

"What! You're going to leave school?"

"Aunt Georgie can't afford to keep me any longer. Everything is so high," sighed the child, with a worldly-wise air that would have seemed funny had it not been so apparent that she knew what she was talking about.

"But you can't be nearly fourteen, Myrtle," protested Peggy. "And you were doing so well in school." [104]

"I'm twelve in September, but Aunt Georgie can get permit for me to work, if she can't afford to keep me in school."

"Would you rather work than go to school?" asked Amy, rather tactlessly.

The eyes of the little girl filled. She sniffed bravely as she fumbled for her handkerchief.

"I like school better," she explained, a catch in her voice. "But I don't like to be a burden."

There was a brief silence on the porch as the little figure went down the walk, and then Priscilla murmured pityingly, "Poor child!"

"It's a shame," exclaimed Peggy warmly. "She's a bright little thing. She's not twelve till September, and she's ready for the high school already. If she could go to school four years more she'd probably be able to earn a good living, but she'll never do very well if she stops school now, for she's not strong enough for heavy work."

"It almost seems a pity," Ruth suggested, "that we've just adopted a French orphan. It seems there are orphans right at home who need help just as much." [105]

Peggy sighed. "I'm not sorry about the French orphan. I suppose we can't imagine the need over there. But I do wish we could do something for Myrtle."

"Peggy Raymond," warned Amy. "Don't let your philanthropy run away with you, and get the idea that we're an orphan asylum. One orphan is all we can manage."

"Yes, of course," Peggy agreed hastily. "Only I was wondering—poor little Myrtle!"

"Can't her aunt afford to give her an education?" Priscilla asked, "Or is she stingy?"

"Oh, I suppose it's pretty hard for Miss Burns to get along with everything so expensive. She's not a high-priced dress-maker, and besides she's mortally slow; one of the puttering sort, you know. At the same time," added Peggy, "I mean to see her and have a talk with her about Myrtle."

Peggy was as good as her word. As postponement was never one of her weaknesses, she saw Miss Burns the following day, and the faded little spinster shed tears as she discussed Myrtle's future. [106]

"Of course I know she ought to go on through high school," she sobbed. "She's been at the head of her class right up through the grades, and if she could finish high school, she wouldn't need to ask any odds of anybody. But I've laid awake night after night thinking, and I can't see my way to do it."

"If you had a little help, Miss Burns, I suppose you could manage, couldn't you? What is the very least you could get along on and let Myrtle stay in school?"

"Why she can't earn a great deal of course," said Miss Burns, wiping her eyes. "She's not old enough for a sales-woman, and she's not strong enough for any hard work, and she don't know anything about stenography."

"And what is the very least you think you could take in place of having Myrtle go to work?"

Miss Burns was one of the people who have a constitutional aversion to answering a direct question, but Peggy's persistence left her no loop-hole of escape. Cornered at last, she expressed [107] the opinion that she could do with a hundred dollars. For some reason not quite clear in her own mind, Peggy had hoped it might be less, and her face showed her disappointment. "You think that is the very least you could get along on, Miss Burns."

"I'm afraid it is, Miss Peggy. Maybe I should have said a hundred and fifty. Look at the price of coal."

"Oh, I know," Peggy agreed. "Well, perhaps something will come up so Myrtle won't have to leave school. I'm sure I hope so."

Peggy repeated the substance of her conversation with Miss Burns to her three chums that afternoon as they were on the way out to Amy's Aunt Phoebe's. For in their efforts to circumvent the high cost of living, the Friendly Terrace girls had begun making weekly or even semi-weekly visits to the country. The season had been a favorable one for all garden produce, but Mr. Frost was finding it difficult to get anything like the help he needed. The girls went out into the garden, picked and pulled what they wanted, paid a price which, compared with the charges in the retail markets, seemed extremely reasonable, and came home with loaded market baskets and a tinge [108] of sunburn in their cheeks. The weekly saving paid their car-fare many times over, and the fact that they all were together lent a festive air to the enterprise.

Peggy's three friends listened silently to their story of her visit to Miss Burns. Peggy's generosity was always leading her to attempt things far too big for her. The girls had stood by her loyally in the matter of the French orphan, but there they drew the line. A second orphan was too much.

"I'm sorry," Amy said, with an air of dismissing the subject. "But I don't see that we can do anything for her."

"You don't think, do you," Peggy hesitated, "that we could give a little entertainment—"

"Oh, Peggy, people are bored to death with benefits and drives, and to try to raise money for a little girl nobody knows about would be hopeless, especially when she's no worse off than thousands of others."

"I suppose that's so," Peggy replied, and reluctantly dropped the subject. Under her [109] submission was a persistent hope that something might happen to aid her in the matter she had so much at heart. But the last thing she or any one else would have thought was that such assistance would come from Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back.

Mr. Frost had been having an unusually hard time with help and was in an exceptionally bad humor. He was one of the men who, when out of sorts, invariable relieve their minds by criticism of the opposite sex. He had heard the girls chattering as they picked the lima beans, and doubtless that furnished the text for his ill-natured sermon.

"Women's tongues do beat all," he declared, as the girls came to the house to pay their reckoning. "It's small wonder they don't count much when it comes to work. They get themselves all wore out talking."

"I think we do some other things beside talking," declared Peggy, dimpling in a disarming fashion.

"And I can't see that we say any sillier things than men do," added Amy.

"O, men can talk or be quiet, just as they please, but a woman's got to talk or die. You couldn't [110] pay her enough to get her to hold her tongue."

"You could pay me enough," said Peggy with spirit.

"Me, too," Amy cried.

Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back sneered contemptuously. "Why, I'd give you four a hundred dollars to hold your tongues for a week."

"Girls," cried Peggy turning to her friends, "I move we take him up on that."

Had Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back been less disagreeable, less contemptuous, the girls might have hesitated, for a week of silence is an ordeal to the least voluble. But Mr. Frost's sneers, combined with Peggy's enthusiasm, swept them off their feet.

"Yes, we'll take you up," Amy cried, and Priscilla and Ruth nodded approval.

Uncle Philander was a little taken aback, and showed it. "You understand when I said hold your tongues, I meant it. If there's an *aye*, *yes*, or *no* out of any of the four of you, it's all off."

"Of course," agreed the four girls in chorus. [111]

Mr. Frost was plainly growing nervous. "Of course I haven't any way to keep tab on you."

"Philander," cried his wife, bristling with indignation, "If you think Amy or any of her friends

would lie for the sake of money—"

"No, I didn't mean that," he half apologized. "I put all four of you on your honor. Not a word out of you, not so much as an *ouch*."

"But we can write notes and explain to our families, of course," cried Peggy.

"Of course," cried Amy, as Mr. Frost hesitated. "And talk on our fingers. All you said was *tongues*."

"You can write all the notes you want to," conceded Uncle Philander generously. Now that he had time to think of it, he was convinced that the conditions he had imposed could not possibly be complied with. Who had ever heard of four lively girls maintaining an unbroken silence for a week? His hundred dollars was safe.

After some discussion it was decided that the week should begin the following morning, to give the girls ample chance to explain their singular undertaking to their friends. And then the four [112] started off with their heavy baskets, chattering excitedly, as if in the hopes of saying in the few hours remaining before bed time, all they would ordinarily have said in the next seven days.

CHAPTER VIII [113]

THE LONGEST WEEK ON RECORD

It was a Thursday when the four Friendly Terrace girls entered on their remarkable contract with Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back, and Friday began the longest week recorded in the experiences of any of the four. According to the calendar, it contained only the usual seven days. According to the clock, each of these days consisted of the customary twenty-four hours. But the four chums knew better. It was at least a month long. They had spent Thursday evening explaining the situation to their friends and relatives and saying good-by as if for a week's absence. It was not to be expected that their news would meet the same reception in all quarters. Fathers and mothers, while not exactly approving, were on the whole rather amused, and inclined to take the attitude that girls will be girls. Among their friends outside, their announcement was received with a surprise that was sometimes suggestive of enjoyment, and [114] again of indignation.

Peggy found Graham particularly obdurate. "Not to speak to me for a week? Well, I like that!"

"I can write you letters, dear."

"Letters!" Graham's repetition of the word was anything but flattering to Peggy's epistolary efforts. "Of course," he went on in a milder tone, "I love your letters when I'm away from you. But to read letters instead of talking to you is like—like eating dried apple pie in October."

"It's only a week," said Peggy, but she sighed. And her sigh would have been much more vehement had she dreamed how long that week would prove.

Priscilla writing a little note to Horace Hitchcock did not sigh over the prospect that she could exchange no words with him for seven days. Indeed she was conscious of a profound relief. Recently Horace had taken up the philosophical style in conversation, and Priscilla, as she listened, frequently found herself unable to understand a word he was saying. At first she [115] assumed that this was due to her not having given him sufficiently close attention, and she had chided herself for her wandering thoughts. But things were no better when she listened her hardest. Priscilla knew that she was not a fool. She had finished her junior year in college, and her class standing in all philosophical subjects had been excellent. If she could not understand what Horace was talking about, she felt reasonably sure that the explanation was not in her own intellectual lack but because Horace was talking nonsense. The polysyllables he used so glibly and the epigrammatic phrases which to the unthinking might have seemed indicative of erudition and originality, when Priscilla came to analyze them seemed to have no more relation to one another than glittering beads strung on a wire. Priscilla was driven to the conclusion that Horace had been reading literature considerably over his head, and that he was reproducing for her benefit a sort of *pot-pourri* of recollections, blended without much regard to their original connection.

But this was not the only reason why Priscilla had a sense of relief in writing to ask Horace not [116] to call for a week. As the days went on, the thought of her silver wedding had been increasingly painful. Horace's affectations, to which for a time she had deliberately closed her eyes, were continually more glaringly in evidence. Once, when they were alone, Priscilla had tremulously hinted that perhaps they had been mistaken in supposing themselves fitted for each other, and Horace's reception of the suggestion had terrified her unutterably. He had addressed himself to the stars and asked if it were true that there was neither faith nor constancy in womankind. Then he had looked at Priscilla, with an expression of agony, and said, "I thought it was you who was to heal my tortured heart, and now you have failed me." But when he began to put his hand to his forehead and mutter that life was only a series of disappointments and that the sooner it was over the better, Priscilla, white to the lips, had assured him that he had misunderstood her. Her efforts to restore his serenity were not altogether successful and she did not feel at ease about [117]

him until, a day or two later, she saw his name among the guests at a dinner dance, at Mrs. Sidney Vanderpool's country house. But the interview had confirmed her certainty that there was no escaping the snare into which she had walked with eyes wide open. And for that reason a week free from Horace's society was more than welcome.

The silent week starting Friday morning had seemed rather a joke to begin with. At four breakfast tables, four girls who contributed not a syllable to the conversation, contributed largely, nevertheless, to the family gaiety. But by noon the humorous phase of the situation had passed, at least for the four chiefly concerned. All of them went about with an expression of Spartan-like resolve, blended with not a little anxiety. For when people have been chattering animatedly every day for fifteen or twenty years, it is very easy for an exclamation to escape their lips in spite of resolutions to the contrary.

Peggy probably had the hardest time of any one. For her brother, Dick, although fond of calling attention to a fuzzy excrescence which he denominated his mustache, was as fond of mischief as [118] he had ever been. And while undoubtedly he would have been sorry to have Peggy break her vow of silence, and lose the hundred dollars which meant another year in school for little Myrtle Burns, he nevertheless subjected his sister to any number of nerve-racking tests. A crash as of a falling body in an upstairs room, a cry of anguish from the cellar, a loud knocking on the ceiling of her room apparently by ghostly fingers, were among the devices Dick used for the testing of his sister. On each occasion Peggy started convulsively, but somehow or other choked back the cry that rose to her lips, "Oh, what is it? What is the matter?"

Though Dick was the only one of the Raymond family who made deliberate attempts to betray his sister into unguarded speech, Mrs. Raymond, innocent as were her intentions, was almost as much of a stumbling-block. "Now what do you think, Peggy," she would begin, "had we better try Turners again or—" And then catching sight of the Joan-of-Arc expression on Peggy's face, she would break off her question in the middle, and cry, "Oh, dear, I entirely forgot! I shall certainly [119] be glad when this ridiculous week is over."

There was one advantage in a week of silence. The girls were allowed to write letters, and they took full advantage of that permission. They wrote to aunts and uncles and cousins and all sorts of neglected relatives. They wrote to old friends, who had moved to other cities. They wrote to the girls they had come to know in their work as farmerettes. They wrote—all four of them—to Lucy Haines, a country girl they had helped one summer vacation, now a successful teacher. If all weeks had been like this one, the postman who collected the mail from the Friendly Terrace letter-box would have needed an assistant. Peggy also wrote to Graham every day, and she tried to make her letters as sprightly and entertaining as possible, so that he should not miss their daily talks so much. But under the circumstances there was not a great deal to tell, and if it had not been for Dick's machinations, which Peggy repeated in much detail, she feared that her missives would have proved dull reading.

Every afternoon the four girls met at the home of one or the other of the quartette, bringing [120] sewing or fancy work. They usually sat indoors, for if a neighbor conversationally inclined had happened to come along while they were occupying the porch the situation might have been embarrassing. Amy made a valiant effort to revive a finger alphabet they had used in school to carry on extended conversations across a school room. But though it had not taken long for the girls to refresh their memories of the letters, they found it much harder work to converse after the fashion of the deaf and dumb than it had seemed when they were younger, and for the most part conversation languished. They sat and sewed, each vaguely cheered by the proximity of her fellow sufferers, though all the time conscious that this was an abnormally long week.

But long as the days were, each came to an end in time. Amy had fallen in the way of apprising Aunt Phoebe by post-card that another day had been passed in silence. "Tell Mr. Frost he might as well make out his check now," she wrote at the conclusion of the third day. "We haven't [121] spoken yet, and now we've learned the secret, there isn't the least danger that any one will speak before the week is up."

As the days went by, the vigilance of the girls increased instead of relaxing. Each realized that a single inadvertent exclamation from the lips of one would render vain the effort and sacrifice of all. This realization got rather on their nerves, and Ruth particularly, showed it.

"It's the most absurd thing I ever heard of," declared Mr. Wylie at breakfast one morning, as Ruth came downstairs heavy-eyed. "You girls call yourselves college women, don't you? This affair is worthy of a bunch of high-school Freshmen."

"I think Ruth wants me to remind you," said Mrs. Wylie, as her daughter looked at her appealingly, "that they mean to use the hundred dollars in sending a little girl to school."

"But no man in his senses is going to pay good money for anything like this. Who is he, anyway?"

"A sort of Uncle of Amy's, didn't you say, Ruth?"

As Amy's relationship to Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back was too complicated to explain [122] without the assistance of language, Ruth contented herself with nodding.

"Probably he was only joking. A hundred dollars is a hundred dollars, especially these days. You oughtn't to have taken him seriously, Ruth."

"I think Peggy is really responsible," remarked Mrs. Wylie, with a rather mischievous smile, for Mr. Wylie's admiration for his son's fiancée was as outspoken as Graham's own.

"Is that so, Ruth?"

Ruth nodded.

"Then all I can say," declared Mr. Wylie, pushing back his chair from the table, "is that in this matter my future daughter-in-law showed less than her usual good horse-sense."

"I'm beginning to understand something that always puzzled me," Peggy wrote Graham, that same evening. "You know in mathematics they talk about an *asymptote*, something that something else is always approaching, but never reaches. That always seemed so foolish to me, to approach a thing continually and never get there. But now I understand. Thursday is an asymptote." [123]

But though Thursday loitered on the way, it arrived at last, and four girls woke to the realization that it was supremely important—the day that either made void or confirmed the success of the previous six. They spent the morning characteristically. Ruth, who had felt under the weather for a day or two, decided to stay in bed, this being a safe refuge. Priscilla took a basket of mending and retired to her room. Peggy spent her time at her writing desk and tried to collect some fugitive ideas into a theme for her college English work in the fall. Amy devoted herself to making a cake with a very thick chocolate frosting.

It happened that this morning Amy had received a postcard from Aunt Phoebe, the first reply to her daily bulletins. "Glad to hear you are getting on so well," wrote the old lady. "P—— quite nervous." After the cake was finished and the frosting hardening, Amy resolved to take Aunt Phoebe's card over to Peggy. While they could not talk it over, they could exchange smiles, and probably a few ideas as well, through the medium of a lead pencil. The luckless Amy picked up the post card and started off in high spirits. [124]

It happened that one of the houses on the Terrace had been built with a slate roof, which at the present time was undergoing repairs. Amy, swinging lightly along the familiar way, gained rapidly on an old man ahead who walked very deliberately, apparently examining the numbers of the houses. Amy noticed that, although the sky was clear, he carried a massive cotton umbrella.

The old gentleman was just opposite the house which was being repaired, when one of the workmen pulled out a broken slate and without even looking behind him, flung it to the street below. Amy saw the workman before the slate left his hand, and some intuition warned her of danger. "Look out!" she cried shrilly, "Look out!"

The old man ahead dodged back. He was none too quick, for the piece of slate, flying through the air with the sharp edge down, dropped where he had stood an instant before. The old man took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. Amy saw it was Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back. [125]

The discovery, interesting in itself, meant nothing to Amy at the moment. She uttered a heart-broken wail. She had spoken before the week was up. By her impulsive exclamation she had forfeited the hundred dollars. Though she knew acknowledgment must be made to her partners in the undertaking, since as she had broken the spell the others were automatically released from the obligation of silence, to face any of them at that moment seemed impossible. Without a word to Mr. Frost, Amy wheeled about and started for home, the tears running down her cheeks.

Breathing hard, Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back trotted after her. What he meant to say does not matter, since the discovery that Amy was in tears resulted in the inquiry, "What are you crying for, hey?"

"I lost it," Amy sobbed. "I spoke."

Her companion seemed to be deliberating. "I s'pose you mean the hundred dollars."

"Of course I mean the hundred dollars. But I don't see how I could have helped it. I couldn't walk on deliberately and see a sharp piece of slate drop on a man's head." [126]

"I came in to-day thinking I'd have a talk with that friend of yours," said Mr. Frost, "seeing she seemed to be the head one in this thing. I was going to tell her that now I'd thought it over, my conscience wasn't quite easy about this agreement of ourn. I'm afraid it is too much like placing a bet."

Amy's jaw dropped as she looked at him. Her tears dried instantly, the moisture evaporated by the fires of her wrath. But either because her usually ready tongue was out of practise after six days of idleness, or because the realization of the perfidy of the old man produced a momentary paralysis of her vocal chords, not a word escaped her parted lips.

"Yes, it didn't look right to me," Mr. Frost continued. "It was the same as betting that you four girls couldn't keep from talking for a week. My conscience wouldn't let me be a party to anything of that sort. But—"

The pause after the "but" was prolonged. Amy searched her vocabulary for words that would do justice to the occasion, but Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back was continuing before she knew what she wanted to say. [127]

"Having your life saved is a different thing. That slate had an edge on it like a meat ax, and coming through the air the way it was, it would have cleft my head open like it had been an egg shell. My widow could have got damages all right, but that wouldn't have helped me out."

They had reached Amy's door by now. "Got pen and ink handy?" asked Mr. Frost, with a marked change of manner.

"Yes," said Amy tonelessly, and opened the door for him. She led the way to the writing desk, and pointed out the articles he required. Mr. Philander Frost, seating himself, wrote out a check for a hundred dollars, payable to Amy Lassell or order.

"There," he said as he reached for the blotter. "Can't nobody no matter how sensitive their consciences are, find any fault with that. A hundred dollars ain't any too much to pay for having your life saved."

And then the ink had a narrow escape from being overturned, for Amy flung her arms around the old gentleman's neck and hugged him. "Uncle Philander!" she screamed, "You're a prince." [128]

And that is how little Myrtle Burns was assured of her year in high school, and Uncle Philander-Behind-His-Back was adopted, unreservedly, by four unusually attractive nieces.

"'A HUNDRED DOLLARS AIN'T ANY TOO MUCH TO PAY FOR HAVING YOUR LIFE SAVED'"

CHAPTER IX [129]

THE MOST WONDERFUL THING IN THE WORLD

Nelson Hallowell had something on his mind. Ruth had discovered it early in the evening. They had all gone over to Peggy's, and there had been the usual amount of talk and laughter, but Nelson had hardly spoken. Every time she looked in his direction, Ruth found his eyes upon her, and something in his manner said as plainly as words could have told it, that he was only waiting to get her alone to impart some confidence of more than ordinary importance. Ruth was not in the least inclined to be self-conscious, but for some reason his unwavering regard made her nervous. She was glad when the clock struck ten and she could take her leave.

Though Graham had lingered for a little talk with Peggy, and Nelson and Ruth had the sidewalk to themselves, the young man seemed in no hurry to relieve his mind. Instead he walked at Ruth's side apparently absorbed in thought. Ruth, waiting, half amused and half vexed by his air of preoccupation, pinched her lips tightly shut as she resolved not to be the first to break the silence. [130]

At the door of her home Nelson suddenly roused himself. "May I come in for a little while, Ruth?"

"Of course, Nelson. It's Friday. No classes to-morrow."

"There's something I want to talk to you about," he said, and followed her indoors with an air of summoning his resolution. As Ruth turned on the lights in the living room, he drew a letter from his pocket and handed it to her. "I'd like to have you read that."

Ruth seated herself by the drop light, and drew out the enclosure. It was folded so that her eye fell at once on the signature. "Why," she exclaimed, "that's the nice soldier you got acquainted with in the hospital."

"Yes. The fellow from Oklahoma, you know."

Ruth unfolded the letter and began to read. Immediately her expression underwent a noticeable change. One would have said that the letter annoyed her, though when at length she lifted her eyes and met Nelson's expectant look, she was laughing. "Did you ever hear of anything so absurd!" she exclaimed. [131]

Nelson cleared his throat. "If you look at it in one way, it's quite an unusual chance. You see he's willing to take me without any capital—"

"I don't know what he ever saw in you to make him think you'd make a ranchman," Ruth exclaimed. "I can't imagine you as a cowboy. I suppose," she added excusingly, "that he's always been used to an out-door life and it seems rather dreadful to him for any one to be shut up in a

book-store."

"It is rather dreadful."

Ruth gave a little start. For a moment she was under an impression that she had not heard Nelson aright, or else that he was joking. And yet his voice had no suggestion of humor. It was hoarse and curiously intense, and as she looked at him, she saw that his face was unnaturally flushed.

"Why, Nelson," she cried, "What are you talking about? You can't mean that you don't like your [132]
work."

Nelson looked at her appealingly. Without realizing it, Ruth had spoken in a rather peremptory fashion, and at once his sensitive face showed his fear of having offended her.

"I used to think I liked it, Ruth."

"Used to! Why, Nelson—"

"But now it's like being in a strait jacket. I don't see how any fellow who was in the service can ever get back to standing behind a counter and be satisfied."

Again Ruth noticed the curious intensity of his manner. She looked at the letter lying upon the table with a feeling of irritation she did not stop to analyze.

"Nelson, you don't mean you want to take that offer? You wouldn't really like to go to Oklahoma, would you? Why it's the jumping-off place."

He sat looking at the floor. "I wanted to know what you thought," he murmured.

"I'd hate to say all I thought. Why, Nelson, I don't believe it's ever occurred to you what it would mean to your mother." Ruth herself had not thought of Mrs. Hallowell until that instant, [133]
and she made up for her tardiness by speaking very earnestly. "It would simply kill her to have you off at the ends of the earth."

"Mother's pretty game, you know." Nelson smiled as if recalling something that had pleased him particularly. "She says she wouldn't mind a bit living in Oklahoma."

Ruth swallowed hard. Something in his reminiscent smile added to her vexation.

"I should think you would know better than to take her seriously. She'd die of homesickness. But of course, if you've really set your heart on going thousands of miles away from all your friends, I wouldn't want to put anything in your way."

"Ruth, you know I don't mean that." He looked rather bewildered at her injustice. "I haven't answered the letter. I just wanted to know what you thought about it."

"Well, I think the whole thing is absurd. I suppose you are a little restless after your army life, but you'll get over that."

"I suppose I will," Nelson acknowledged. He was so humble about it that Ruth promptly [134]
forgave him for having given favorable consideration to the offer of his friend in Oklahoma, and was her usual pleasant self during the remainder of his stay.

As far as Nelson was concerned, the matter was dropped, but unluckily for Ruth's peace of mind Peggy was yet to be heard from. The next day was Saturday and Peggy dropped in soon after breakfast.

"Ruth, what was the matter with Nelson last evening? I never knew anybody to be so quiet. I was afraid that perhaps something was said that hurt his feelings. He's such a sensitive fellow."

"No indeed, Peggy. It wasn't anything particular." Ruth hesitated, uncertain whether to let it go at that, or to explain the situation in full. Her life-long habit of confiding in Peggy proved more than a match for her undefined hesitation, and she went on to tell of the letter from Oklahoma with its preposterous offer. She finished with a little contemptuous laugh, but Peggy's face was grave.

"Did he want to go, Ruth?"

"Why, he—well, it seems, Peggy, that since he got out of the service he's been sort of restless. [135]
He got so used to outdoor life that he doesn't enjoy indoor work. But I tell him he'll get over that."

"I suppose," said the downright Peggy, looking straight at her friend, "that you feel that you wouldn't want to live in Oklahoma."

Ruth jumped. Then as the blood rushed tingling to the roots of her hair, she turned on Peggy a look of intense indignation.

"Peggy Raymond, what on earth are you talking about?"

Peggy sat without replying and Ruth continued vehemently, "Of course I like Nelson Hallowell; like him very much. I consider him one of my very best friends. But that's all. The very idea of your talking as if—"

"I suppose," said Peggy, as Ruth came to a halt, "you'd miss him if he went out West."

Ruth brightened. "Yes, that's just it. I'd miss him terribly. I really think he's one of the nicest boys I ever knew, and for all he's so quiet, we have dandy times together. But as for anything else —"

"Don't you think," suggested Peggy, as Ruth halted again, "that it seems a little bit unfair to [136] interfere with Nelson's future, just because you like to have him dropping in every day or two and because it's convenient to have an escort whenever you want to go somewhere?"

Ruth found herself incapable of replying. She sat staring at Peggy with a resentment that she could not have concealed if she had tried. And Peggy, quite unmoved by her friend's indignation, continued judicially, "If you were going to marry Nelson, you would have a perfect right to help decide where he should be located. But it's considerable of a responsibility to persuade him to turn down an offer like that, just because you're afraid you're going to miss him if he goes away."

Ruth found her voice. "Nelson Hallowell can do exactly as he pleases. He asked my advice and I gave it, but he doesn't have to take it unless he wants to."

"That's not fair, Ruth. However you feel about it, you know perfectly well that Nelson wants to please you more than anything in the world. And besides, when a friend asks you your advice, [137] you're supposed to think of what is best for him and not of what you want yourself."

"Really, Peggy," said Ruth rather witheringly, "as long as Nelson is satisfied with my advice, I can't see that any one else need take it to heart."

Peggy colored. It was a fact that, relying on long intimacy and close friendship, she had said more to Ruth than she would have been justified in saying to another girl. "Excuse me, Ruth," she answered quickly. "I'm afraid I was rather interfering."

The effect of this apology was peculiar. Ruth burst into tears. "Oh, don't, Peggy," she sobbed. "Don't act as if it wasn't any business of yours what I did."

"I'm afraid," owned Peggy, "that I'm too much inclined to think everything you do is my business."

"No, you're not. We're just the same as sisters. And it would kill me if you washed your hands of me."

Peggy burst into a reassuring laugh. "Small danger of that, dearie. I'm likely to remain [138] Meddlesome Peggy to the end of the chapter, as far as you're concerned. And I don't know what you're crying for, Ruth."

Ruth was not quite sure herself, but she continued to sob. "Do you think I ought to encourage Nelson to go, Peggy?"

"I don't say that. But it seems to me you ought not to discourage him, unless you have a good reason. And though I don't know much about such things, it sounded to be like a wonderful offer. What does Nelson think?"

"I—I guess he thought so, too, but I didn't give him a chance to say much." Ruth dropped her head upon Peggy's shoulder and sobbed. "Oklahoma is such a dreadful way off."

"I know it is," Peggy patted her shoulder tenderly. "I'd nearly cry my eyes out if anybody I loved went there to live."

"Nelson is so good, Peggy. He wanted to go, but he gave it up just as soon as he saw I didn't like the idea. And I know he hates that old book store."

Peggy continued to smile rather wistfully and to pat the heaving shoulders while Ruth prattled [139] on. "I'm awfully selfish, I know. It's just as you said. I never gave a thought to what was best for him."

"I never said that, Ruth, I'm sure."

"Well, it's so, anyway. I wonder if he's answered that letter yet. I'm going to call up and see."

Ruth had no need to look in the telephone book to find the number of Flynn's book store. As the hour was early, Nelson himself answered the call. His politely interrogative tone changed markedly as in response to his, "Hello," Ruth said, "It's I, Nelson."

"Ruth! Why, good morning!"

"Have you answered that letter from Oklahoma?"

"No, I haven't, Ruth. But never mind that letter. We won't talk about it any more."

"I just wanted to ask you not to answer it till we'd talked it over again, Nelson."

He hesitated a moment. "I don't see the use of that. I wanted to see how you really felt about it, and now I've found out."

"Well, don't answer it right away. That's all. Are you coming up to-night, Nelson?" [140]

"Sure."

Ruth smiled faintly at the emphatic syllable. "Good-by," she said, then sighed as she hung up the receiver. "Well, it's all right," she told the waiting Peggy. "I haven't done any mischief that I can't undo."

But when Nelson came that evening he proved unexpectedly obdurate. He showed an extreme reluctance to re-open the subject of the Oklahoma proposition, and roused Ruth's indignation by hinting that the matter did not concern Peggy Raymond, and he could not see any reason for her "butting in." And when sternly called to order for this bit of heresy, he still showed himself unwilling to talk of Oklahoma.

"What's the use?" he burst out suddenly. "I know how you feel about it. I—I—It's awfully hard explaining, Ruth, when I haven't any right to—to say how I feel—but the long and short of it is I wouldn't go to any place where you wouldn't live."

He stopped, his face scarlet as he realized all his statement implied. Nelson was keenly conscious of his own disadvantages. Graham would soon be in a position to support a family, but [141] the salary Mr. Flynn paid his competent clerk made a wife seem an impossible luxury. Nelson regarded Ruth as the bright particular star of the Friendly Terrace quartette. He considered her prettier than Peggy, wittier than Amy, and more talented than Priscilla. For him to aspire to be the first in her heart was the height of presumption, in Nelson's opinion, and yet he had just said to her in effect that he would not go to any place where she would not go with him. Despairingly he realized how poorly his presumptuous speech had expressed his attitude of worshipful humility.

Then he became aware that Ruth was looking at him from the other side of the table, and that her manner lacked the indignation appropriate to the occasion. She held her head very high, and her eyes were like stars. Nelson suddenly experienced a difficulty in breathing. His heart was beating more rapidly than it had ever beaten under fire. He heard himself asking a question, the audacity of which astounded him.

"You wouldn't think of it, would you, Ruth, going out to that rough cattle country, a girl like [142] you?"

He did not realize the desperation in his voice as he put the question, but its appeal went straight to Ruth's heart. She answered unhesitatingly. "The place wouldn't matter, Nelson. Everything would depend on the one—the one I went with."

It was not an opportune time for Graham to walk into the room. And it argued him obtuse, that instead of realizing he was in the way, he seated himself in the easy chair, and proceeded to discuss a variety of subjects. Once or twice Nelson's answers suggested that his mind was wandering, and small wonder. For when the most wonderful thing in the world has just happened, it is hard on any young fellow to be held up and forced to give his views on universal training.

CHAPTER X [143]

MISTRESS AND MAID

A CAREWORN, anxious expression had come to be so much at home on Priscilla's countenance, that it did not surprise Peggy to look from her window one Saturday morning and see Priscilla approaching, her face so lined by worry as to suggest that the heaviest responsibilities rested on her shoulders. As she was quite unconscious of Peggy's observation, she did not make her usual effort to smile and appear natural.

"I wish I knew what ailed that girl," thought Peggy, studying Priscilla's changed countenance with a heart-sick concern. "She looks years older than she did six months ago, and I can't make out whether she's sick or just unhappy. And the worst of it is that one can't get a thing out of her."

But in this particular instance Peggy was to have no reason to complain of Priscilla's reticence. As Priscilla raised her heavy eyes and saw her friend's face at the window, her own face [144] brightened and she quickened her steps. Peggy hurried to the door, and flung it open with an unreasonable hope that this interview would end the mystery which had baffled her for so long. But the perplexity Priscilla had come to confide was too recent to explain her worried air through the months past. She was hardly in the house before she burst out, "Peggy, I'm in an awful pickle."

"What's the matter? Can I help!"

"I wondered if you would lend me Sally."

"Sally?" repeated Peggy in accents of astonishment. For the maid-of-all-work in the Raymond household was a possession of which few people were envious. Whether Sally was really weak minded was a question on which a difference of opinion was possible, but there was no possible doubt of her talent for doing the wrong thing at the right time or else, vice versa, the right thing at the wrong time. Her one redeeming feature was her amiability, but as this frequently took a

conversational turn, it was not without its drawbacks. That any of her friends could want to borrow Sally, or that any household but their own would put up with the blundering, good-natured apology for a domestic servant, had never entered Peggy's head. [145]

"Sally," she repeated, still in a tone of mystification. "Of course you can have her if you want her, but whatever it is, she'll do it wrong."

"I suppose she could open the door for a caller, couldn't she?"

"Why, she can open a door, as a rule, but just now she's got a tooth-ache, and her head is tied up in a red flannel, so unless the callers are people of strong nerves, they may be startled."

"O dear!" Priscilla's acceptance of this bit of information was so suggestive of tragedy that Peggy was more puzzled than ever. "Who is the caller?" she demanded. "And why in the world do you want Sally?"

"Well, it's quite a story, Peggy. You know Mother's away this week and Martha's having her vacation, and Father and I are taking our meals at the Lindsays. And last evening Horace Hitchcock called, and it seems that an aunt of his is in town."

"Oh!" said Peggy. She always made desperate efforts to act just as usual when Horace's name was mentioned, but under such circumstances she invariably felt as if a thick curtain had dropped between her friend and herself. "Horace Hitchcock's aunt," she repeated, trying valiantly to speak naturally. "Is she his mother's sister or his father's?" [146]

"Neither one. She's his father's aunt, and of course she is quite old and very rich, and it seems she's coming out to call on me."

"To call on you," Peggy exclaimed. "How interesting!"

But that adjective registered an exception to Peggy's usual frankness. Had she spoken her real feelings she would have said, "How dreadful!" For a call from the young man's great-aunt seemed to imply that the young man's intentions were serious, and recognized by the family. Horace and Priscilla! Peggy stifled a groan.

"And you see the fix I'm in," Priscilla was explaining disconsolately. "Of course she's used to butlers and everything, and here I've got to go to open the door myself."

Peggy listened wonderingly. For even if Horace Hitchcock had been an entirely different young man, the necessity for opening the door to his great-aunt would not have impressed her as a tragedy. Priscilla's intuition told her what was passing through the other girl's mind, and she spoke a little fretfully. [147]

"Of course it's silly to mind, Peggy, but I *do* mind, just the same. Mrs. Duncan has a houseful of servants, and she thinks of women who answer their own door-bell as we think of women who take in washing." Priscilla's feeling of resentment at Peggy was enhanced by her own wonder at herself. The glamor which had surrounded Horace in the first renewal of their childish acquaintance had quite disappeared, and yet she could not bear the thought that Horace's great-aunt might look down upon her.

"Sally wouldn't be the least bit of good," Peggy declared, "even if it wasn't for the red flannel. Just when I want Sally to be on her good behavior, she does some perfectly unheard-of thing. When do you expect Mrs. Duncan?"

"Oh, sometime this forenoon. Horace thought about eleven. And that's another thing that puzzles me," exclaimed Priscilla unhappily. "Ought I to dress up, do you think, as long as I'm expecting a call?" [148]

"I'd wear my blue serge, if I were you. Blue serge is always safe and, besides, you look awfully well in that dress. And you need not worry about the maid. I'm it."

"Why, Peggy, what do you mean?"

"Don't insult me by asking for Sally, and then pretending that I won't do. I've got a black dress and a cute little ruffled apron, and I'm just aching to try my hand at one of those fetching caps the maids wear in the movies."

"But, Peggy, suppose Horace should come with his aunt!"

"You don't expect him, do you?"

"No. I'm sure he didn't plan to come last evening. But he might change his mind."

"We'll keep on the look-out. If we see a lady arriving with a young man in tow, I'll roll my cap and apron into a bundle and put them under my arm. Then I'll be your friend, Peggy Raymond, making a morning call. But if the lady is alone, I'm Margaret, the maid." [149]

Priscilla was hardly arrayed in her blue serge when Peggy arrived, and the two girls inspected each other admiringly. The Plainness of the blue serge set off the long lines of Priscilla's slender, graceful figure, while the little frilled, nonsensical cap gave a charm to Peggy's mischievous face. "You look like a queen," Peggy declared.

"And you're darling in that cap. I'm afraid she'll suspect something the minute she sees you."

Mistress and maid were sitting comfortably side by side in the dining-room when the door-bell rang. Peggy started to her feet, but Priscilla clutched her arm. "Don't go far, will you, Peggy."

"I don't want to appear to be eavesdropping, ma'am."

"Nonsense: you can pretend to be dusting something out here. I don't want you to go away." Priscilla was experiencing a panic at the thought of being left to the tender mercies of Horace Hitchcock's great-aunt. She needed the close proximity of Peggy to give her confidence.

Horace had not accompanied Mrs. Duncan. She stood upon the steps, a little withered woman, [150]
rather elaborately dressed, and she inspected Peggy through her lorgnette. "Is Miss Combs in?" she inquired, after finishing her leisurely scrutiny.

"I think so, Madame. Please walk in." Peggy ushered the caller into the front room and brought a tray for her card. Her cheeks had flushed under Mrs. Duncan's inspection. The small, beady eyes in the wrinkled face had a curiously piercing quality, and she wondered uneasily whether this remarkable old woman could possibly have recognized that she was only masquerading.

She carried the card upstairs to Priscilla who had retreated to her room, the prey of nerves, and brought back word that Miss Combs would be down in a few minutes. Then she retired to the adjoining room and began on her dusting. She was not sorry Priscilla had insisted that she be near, for she was extremely curious to hear what the visitor was going to say.

Priscilla followed Peggy in something like half a minute, and greeted her caller sweetly, though [151]
with some constraint. Mrs. Duncan looked her over approvingly. "You're not as pretty as I expected," was her disconcerting beginning.

In the next room Peggy gasped. Priscilla drew herself up and blushed crimson.

"What I meant to say," explained the terrible old woman, "is that you're not as pretty as I expected, but much handsomer. I took it for granted Horace would admire some namby-pamby with a doll's face. I suppose you know you're a very striking type, don't you?"

"I can't say I've thought much about it," prevaricated Priscilla.

"And you're going to college," continued Mrs. Duncan. "What's your idea in that? I suppose you know that if you marry Horace, you ought not to know too much."

"Really, Mrs. Duncan—"

But Priscilla's caller was off at a tangent. "You've got a nice-looking maid? Have you any brothers?"

"No," replied Priscilla mechanically. "I'm an only child."

"When you're married, Miss Combs, take an old woman's advice and never have an attractive [152]
maid about the house. My married life of twenty years was reasonably successful," explained Mrs. Duncan complacently, "and I lay it all to my habit of selecting maids who were either cross-eyed or else pock-marked."

Priscilla felt that she hated her, but as she struggled to conceal her inhospitable emotion, her visitor inquired blandly, "What do you and Horace talk about?"

"About—Oh, about all sorts of things." Priscilla wondered if ever in her life she had appeared as inane and stupid as on this momentous occasion.

"I can't understand him, you know," explained Mrs. Duncan, rubbing her nose. "Sometimes I think it's because I'm a fool, and sometimes I think it's because he's a fool. I dare say you've felt the same uncertainty. But we'd better talk of something else, so you won't look to conscious when he arrives."

"Arrives?" repeated Priscilla blankly.

"Yes, he's to lunch with me down town. He suggested that I would enjoy taking him to—what's [153]
the name of the place? Oh, well, he'll know. Perhaps you'll join us."

Priscilla declined fervently. Without saying it in so many words, she gave the impression that she had a most imperative engagement for the afternoon. As she voiced her stammering refusal, she felt like a criminal on the verge of exposure. For when the bell rang Peggy would answer it, and Horace would at once recognize that Priscilla's attractive maid was no other than Priscilla's bosom friend.

But Peggy, dusting industriously in the adjoining room, had overheard the news that had carried consternation to Priscilla's soul, and acted upon the hint with characteristic promptness. A moment later she appeared in the doorway, waiting unobtrusively till Priscilla looked in her direction. And then she said respectfully, "Miss Priscilla."

Priscilla struggled to play her part. "Yes—Margaret?"

"I haven't done the marketing yet. If you can spare me for a little while, I'll attend to it."

"Certainly, Margaret," replied Priscilla with boundless relief. [154]

As Peggy disappeared, Mrs. Duncan leaned forward and tapped Priscilla's knee. "I tell you

she's too good to be true," she insisted. "She's too pretty, too well-mannered. There's something wrong somewhere. Don't trust her." And Priscilla had to conquer the impression that it was her friend Peggy who was being slandered, before she could assume the nonchalant manner suited to the statement that they had always found Margaret a most trustworthy girl.

Horace arrived some fifteen minutes after Peggy's departure, and his apologies to his great-aunt were more profuse than his slight tardiness called for. Indeed, as Priscilla watched his manner toward the domineering old lady, she was unpleasantly reminded that Mrs. Duncan was a rich widow, and that Horace might cherish the hope of inheriting at least a portion of her wealth. Priscilla had all the contempt of a normal American girl for a fortune-hunter, and her lover had never appeared to less advantage in her eyes than in his obvious efforts to please his eccentric [155]
relative. In her revolt from Horace's methods she went a little too far in the other direction, and her manner as she parted from her guest was frigid rather than friendly. Mrs. Duncan's call was the first indication that Horace's people were aware of his intentions, and Priscilla had a not unreasonable feeling of resentment at being inspected to see if she would do. Although the door had been opened for Mrs. Duncan by a correctly appointed maid, Priscilla was miserably conscious that the call had not been a success, and that her unfavorable impression of Horace's great-aunt was probably returned by that terrible old person with something to spare.

CHAPTER XI [156]
QUITE INFORMAL

Amy's memorable dinner party, which had resulted in making Bob Carey such a frequent caller, was responsible for another agreeable friendship. Bob's sister Hildegarde, if she did not fully share her brother's sentiments where Amy was concerned, acknowledged, nevertheless, to a thorough liking for the girl who had played the part of hostess under such trying circumstances. She saw considerable of Amy and, through her, had made the acquaintance of Amy's especial chums on Friendly Terrace. The girls all liked Hildegarde, and Hildegarde liked them, though she was continually accusing them of being old-fashioned in their ideas. Hildegarde had rather more spending money than was good for her, and her social ambitions were the bane of Bob's existence. Bob hated formality. He never put on his dress suit except under protest, and his popularity among his sister's friends, with the resulting invitations to all sorts of affairs, [157]
awakened his profound resentment. The simple good times of Amy's set where every one came at eight o'clock and went home at ten, exactly suited him.

There was perhaps a spice of malice back of an invitation Amy received one morning. The previous evening Bob had accompanied his sister to the home of one of her friends. He had gone reluctantly, only yielding when Hildegarde had agreed to start for home promptly at ten. There had been other callers, however, and bridge had been suggested, so that it was quarter of one when the brother and sister reached home. Bob was frankly sulky. "I hate to go down to the office in the morning feeling like a fool because I haven't had sleep enough," he declared.

"Bob Carey, any one would suppose you were an old grandfather to hear you talk. I don't know another fellow your age who thinks he has to go to bed with the chickens."

"And knowing the hours some of your friends keep," returned Bob irritatingly, "I'm not surprised at their seeming lack of intelligence. They're practically walking in their sleep." [158]

"Please leave my friends alone. You wouldn't be particularly pleased if I began sneering at Amy."

"Sneering at Amy!" Bob's tone was scornful as he repeated his sister's words. "If you did, it would be only to get even with me."

"I don't suppose she's absolute perfection."

"I don't know."

"Oh, Bob, don't be so absurd." But though Hildegarde ended with a laugh, she was still resentful. She knew that Bob had planned to call on Amy that evening and shrewdly judged that, since she had thwarted his intention, he would go the following night. Accordingly she called Amy on the phone bright and early, and invited her to attend a down-town picture show; not an ordinary movie, but a special attraction with the seats selling at regular theater prices. Amy exclaimed delightedly, and then caught herself up.

"I forgot that Peggy and Priscilla were coming over to-night. But I'm sure they'll let me off. I'll call them up and then call you. I'm crazy to see that picture, but I didn't expect to for a year or [159]
two till it got down to the twenty-five cent houses."

"We'll ask Peggy and Priscilla to go, too," said Hildegarde.

"Gorgeous," replied Amy, "and it's so near the end of vacation we can make it a final spree"; and Hildegarde, smiling a little, proceeded to call the two Sweet P's as she mentally designated them. Both girls were unqualifiedly delighted to accept, for one of the advantages of not possessing too much money is that the zest for simple pleasures remains keen. Hildegarde had

friends who were blasé over a trip to Europe, and she always felt a little wonder, not without a tinge of patronage it must be admitted, over the thoroughness with which Amy and her friends could enjoy things.

When Hildegarde announced casually at the dinner table that she would have to be excused before the desert, as she and Amy were to see the "Star of Destiny" that evening, her brother shot her a comprehending glance. "I'd have bought a ticket for you, Bob," Hildegarde explained [160] teasingly, "Only I felt sure you meant to go to bed at nine, and make up the sleep you lost last evening."

"You're always thoughtful, Hildegarde," said Bob with an irony so apparent that his mother stared. And Hildegarde hurrying through her dinner, felt cheerful certainty that as far as her brother was concerned, she had evened the score.

The "Star of Destiny" proved quite as thrilling as any of the audience could have wished, and the accompanying comedy a trifle less inane than the average picture comedy. At ten o'clock the girls left the theater, while the crowd that had been standing in line scrambled to take the seats they had vacated. As they reached the sidewalk, Hildegarde slipped her hand through the arm of Priscilla, who happened to be nearest, "I'm on the point of starvation," she declared gaily. "I had to hurry through my dinner so, I feel as though I hadn't had a thing. Now we'll go over to the Green Parrot and get something to eat."

The guests hesitated. "Is—do you think it is all right for girls to go there alone in the evening?" [161] asked Peggy doubtfully.

"Why of course. The name's rather lurid, but it's a perfectly nice place. Let's take this cross-street and then we'll save half a block."

On the way to the popular restaurant, Hildegarde did most of the talking. None of her guests felt exactly comfortable over accepting the invitation; and yet to decline it, when Hildegarde declared herself half starved, seemed decidedly ungracious. None of the Friendly Terrace girls had been brought up to think a chaperone a necessary accompaniment to all youthful pleasures, but venturing into a down-town restaurant at ten o'clock in the evening, without either chaperone or escort, was rather too up-to-date to please any of them. Peggy pictured Graham's face when she told him of the climax of the evening's pleasures, and smiled rather ruefully.

Once inside, it must be admitted, the spirits of all three revived. The big room was so lighted that it was more dazzling than the noon day. A space had been cleared for dancing, and several couples were revolving in time to a catchy popular air. The majority of the tables were occupied, [162] but the head-waiter, who evidently recognized Hildegarde, led the way to a small round table at the side, and seated them with a flourish. No one had seemed to notice them, and Peggy hoped that their inconspicuous location would prevent any unwelcome attention.

"After all," she thought sensibly, "it's a perfectly respectable place, and perhaps it's not considered queer for girls to come alone." Unconsciously her fear of arousing unfavorable comment rendered her unusually subdued, and the other girls took their cue from her, speaking in their lowest voices, smiling discreetly, and otherwise conducting themselves with as much decorum as if there had been a chaperone apiece.

After some discussion they decided on welsh rarebit, and Hildegarde also ordered coffee and rolls. The rarebit came in due time, an island of toast in a seething lava-lake of rarebit. The girls sniffed appreciatively and exchanged smiles. "To think I didn't know I was hungry," Amy exclaimed.

"I wish I could make my rarebits smooth like this," sighed Peggy. "It looks so wonderful that I [163] hate to eat it."

Their faces cheerful, but their manners still decorously subdued, the four girls attacked the dainty which has so undesirable a reputation in the matter of dreams. Though Hildegarde was the only one of the four who had not done justice to her dinner, all were young enough to feel hungry at the sight of the tempting dish. The islands of toast vanished as if submerged by a tidal wave. The miniature lava lakes gradually disappeared, and the big plate of rolls was so diminished by successive onslaughts that the few remaining had a lonely look.

Priscilla was buttering the end of her roll when, in involuntary emphasis of something she was saying, she pressed it more energetically than she realized. As if determined to escape the fate of its comrades, the fragment flew from her fingers. It cleared the space between that table and the next as if it had been winged, and then made sure of escape by dropping in the coffee cup of a young man in eye glasses, who was composedly eating fried oysters.

The young man looked up, startled as a splash of coffee on his cheek challenged his attention. [164] He looked about in all directions and at length his inquiring gaze came to the table where sat the agonized Priscilla. Here, alas! it halted. For as she had seen the bewildering gyrations of the fragment of Priscilla's roll, Amy had burst into an astonished giggle and had continued to giggle without cessation. Hildegarde, too, had lost interest in the remnant of her meal, and sat leaning her head on her hand, speechless with laughter. As for Peggy and Priscilla, they were looking at each other in silent stupefaction, their flaming cheeks seemingly proclaiming their guilt. It was no wonder the young man in eye-glasses looked no farther. He had found the ones responsible.

For an agonizing moment Priscilla sat uncertain what to do. Then summoning her common

sense to her aid, she turned to the sole occupant of the next table. "I am very sorry," she said with that dignity that was Priscilla's own. "A piece of roll slipped from my fingers when I was buttering it, and flew across to your table. It—it is in your coffee cup."

The young man looked into his cup and perceived the floating fragment. When again he lifted [165] his eyes to Priscilla's he was smiling. "I thought some acquaintance had thrown something at me to attract my attention," he explained.

"No," said Priscilla. "It was an unfortunate accident. I beg your pardon." And then she turned to her own coffee, and seemingly gave it her attention, though so intense was her excitement that she might as well have been drinking warm water as the coffee for which the Green Parrot was famous.

Peggy was proud of the dignity with which Priscilla had met a difficult situation, but poor Priscilla was not to find it easy to preserve that dignity. Amy was still giggling, her face wearing an expression of suffering, due to the exhausting effect of continuous laughter. Across the table Hildegarde pressed her handkerchief to her eyes and moaned softly. And all at once it seemed to Priscilla that she must shriek with laughter or die.

A moment later Peggy uttered an ejaculation of consternation, for the tears were running down [166] Priscilla's cheeks. She sat perfectly erect, her eyes upon the table, and her only sign of emotion those tell-tale tears. Peggy was really alarmed.

"Priscilla, you mustn't take it so to heart. It wasn't anything. Don't cry."

"But I must do something," responded Priscilla in a strangled voice. "Oh, can't we get away?"

Her laughing companions sobered at the discovery that Priscilla was in tears. Hildegarde called the waiter and demanded her check. But before they could get away, the young man in eye-glasses had risen and crossed to their table.

"I hope you're not worrying about that roll," he said, looking down dismayed at Priscilla's tear-wet cheeks. "It's not worth thinking of twice, you know."

Seeing that Priscilla was incapable of replying, Peggy came to her friend's assistance. "Of course it was only an accident," she said, "But it made her a little nervous."

"So I see. I'm terribly sorry. If I could be of any service—" The young man's face was troubled, [167] his manner earnest. Peggy appreciated the sincerity of his feeling, even while she longed to take him by the ear and lead him to the door. For heads were turning in their direction from all over the room. They were the observed of all observers.

"Oh, thank you," said Peggy hastily, "she will feel all right as soon as she gets outside. This room is so warm," she added rather inanely. To her enormous relief the waiter appeared with Hildegarde's change. Hildegarde tipped him extravagantly, rammed her remaining bills into her purse, and all four girls started for the door. The young man with the eye-glasses remained standing, staring after them, and Peggy's cheeks crimsoned as she realized the attention they were attracting.

She was quite sure she had a case of hysterics on her hands when, once outside, Priscilla began to laugh. It started in a little smothered giggle which soon had developed into peals of laughter. Peggy was terrified. "Priscilla," she cried, "for Heaven's sake—"

But Amy who had begun laughing sympathetically, as soon as Priscilla started off, checked [168] herself to remonstrate.

"Let her alone, Peggy. All that ails her is she wanted to laugh and couldn't, and I don't know anything that hurts worse. Isn't that it, Priscilla?"

Priscilla could not answer in words, but she nodded vehemently and laughed and wiped her wet eyes and laughed on till she sobbed. And then all at once she stopped short, drew a long breath, and exclaimed, "I feel better."

They made their way to the street cars, discussing the late unpleasantness with much animation and making use of many lurid adjectives. It was Hildegarde who exclaimed, "Don't you wish you knew who he was?" She referred, of course, to the young man in eye-glasses.

Priscilla stiffened. "Mercy, no! I hope he was a stranger in town, stopping over a train, and that I'll never lay eyes on him again."

But that wish, though it came from the depths of Priscilla's heart, was not destined to come true.

CHAPTER XII [169]

GOOD-BY

College had opened; but they had slipped into it so quietly that there hardly seemed to be a break. For Peggy and Priscilla, perhaps, there was a bit of a pang at the realization that this was

the last year of what would probably be one of the sweetest periods in their lives to look back on; and they privately vowed to make it rich in experience and the beauty of living. Ruth and Amy, like Southey's brother who said that "no young man believes that he will ever die," felt that college life would never, could never, end. So a week after the beginning of classes found the four girls trying conscientiously to live in the present, and stifling vague, tantalizing memories of the past three months.

A number of letters passed between Nelson Hallowell and his friend in Oklahoma before the great step was decided on. And it must be confessed that in the meantime Ruth's college work [170] suffered. Nelson came almost every evening to pour into her attentive ears the story of his hopes and ambitions, and Ruth listened with the happy confidence that her approval meant more to him than to any one in the world.

Ruth and Nelson were living in an enchanted world, where perfect understanding took the place of speech. Nelson did not feel himself at liberty to say to her the thing that was constantly in his thoughts. The salary Mr. Flynn had paid him had not enabled him to save any money, and his venture in Oklahoma, promising as he believed it, was, after all, only a venture, with a possibility of failure. Nelson knew that he himself was bound fast and irrevocably, but he wanted to leave Ruth free as air. Yet he talked to her with the assurance that she knew all he was in honor bound not to say, and her look, as she listened, confirmed that certainty.

Those weeks during which the matter was being settled were a happy time for both of them. Youth has a way of making the most of a present joy, regardless of what the future has in store, and while this seems very short-sighted to some older people, who can always look ahead far [171] enough to be miserable, the young will probably continue to enjoy to-day's sunshine—regardless of the weather prognosticator, who assures them of a storm in the middle of the week with a drop in temperature. Nelson and Ruth saw as much of each other as they could, and looked no further than a happiness born of a confidence and understanding.

But the thing was settled at last, and the generous offer of Nelson's soldier friend definitely accepted. Nelson gave Mr. Flynn notice, and that irritable gentleman promptly lost his temper, and accused his reliable clerk of folly and ingratitude. Later he realized his mistake, and offered to raise his salary. But Nelson was as little moved by Mr. Flynn's smiles as he had been by his frowns, and Mr. Flynn promptly relapsed into his former irascibility.

"The war spoiled a lot of you young fellows. You're sick of hard work. Loafing is the only thing that appeals to you."

"I never heard," laughed Nelson, "that life on a cattle ranch was considered a soft snap."

"Well, if it isn't, you'll soon give it up," said Mr. Flynn disagreeably. "An easy berth is what [172] you're looking for, and it's my opinion that you'll look some time before you find it."

The next two weeks fairly flew. Nelson was getting his necessary outfit, and every afternoon, on the way home, he stopped to exhibit to Ruth his latest purchases. And now the time had come when it was hard for Ruth to smile and show the proper interest. Sometimes when she remembered that the decision had been left to her, and that she had brought this on herself, her heart almost failed her. It would have been so much easier to have gone on in the old way. The thought of the thousands of miles that would soon stretch between Nelson and herself gave her a weak feeling in the knees. They had a great deal to say in those days about letters but each realized, only two well, that the best letter ever penned is a poor substitute for the exchange of speech and of smiles.

The day of Nelson's departure Ruth went through the customary routine with a curious sense of unreality. She had suggested Nelson's coming to dinner, but he had declined, and she would [173] never know what that refusal cost him.

"I'd love to, Ruth. You don't know how I'd love to. But I think I should take my last meal with mother."

"Yes, Nelson, I think so, too."

"She says she won't go down to the station to see me off," Nelson went on. "She's been keen about my going from the start, but now that it's come to the point, it's harder than she thought."

Ruth reflected that she could sympathize with Mrs. Hallowell perfectly.

"The train goes at ten," Nelson continued with a sprightly air that would not have deceived the most gullible, "so I'll have plenty of time to bore you stiff before you see the last of me."

Ruth forced the smile his jest demanded. "You know we're all going to the station with you," she said. "Even Bob Carey's coming."

"I hope that Hitchcock won't show up," exclaimed Nelson apprehensively.

Ruth laughed. "No, I don't think Horace expects to honor us. Isn't it the queerest thing," she [174] added, "what Priscilla can see in him?"

"I should say so. Priscilla's one of the finest girls you'd meet in a day's journey, and Hitchcock is a nut. I shouldn't think she could stand it to have him around. Though I suppose," concluded Nelson with customary modesty, "that Priscilla thinks just the same about you and me."

"Priscilla! She wouldn't dare." Ruth's indignation was so intense that Nelson shouted with laughter, but it warmed his heart, nevertheless.

In that last quick-moving Saturday, Ruth saw Nelson for a few moments in the morning, and again about three in the afternoon. His stay was short and rather unsatisfactory for he had some last errands to attend to, and his mind was so full of them that his thoughts wandered from what he was saying, and he left his sentences unfinished in the most irritating fashion.

After he had answered a question of Ruth's in a way which showed he had hardly heard what [175]
she had said, he looked up quickly at her half-vexed exclamation, laughed, and jumped to his feet.

"It's no use, Ruth," he said. "I'm one of the fellows who's good for only one thing at a time. I'll attend to these thousand-and-one things that have been left over, and I'll see you about eight o 'clock to-night. That will give us time for a nice little visit."

Up till that time the hours had fairly flown. Now they dragged. Ruth watched the clock and waited for the tiresome, leisurely hour hand to point to eight. The clan was to gather at a little after nine, and she was thankful when Graham departed for Peggy's shortly after finishing dinner. Peggy would keep him till the last minute. Peggy would understand. Ruth had taken great pains in dusting the living-room that morning, and she looked around it thinking that it made a picture of cosy comfort Nelson might be glad to carry with him.

It was eight o'clock at last. Ruth straightened a book on the table, brushed a speck of dust
from her gown, and sat down facing the door. There were quick steps on the side walk, and she [176]
never doubted that they would come on up the walk, and then up the steps, and she meant to have the door open before he had time to ring. But the footsteps went on and the minute hand of the clock was also moving.

At quarter past eight Ruth was nervous. She got up and down, adjusted the window shades, changed the arrangement of the chairs, fussed with the flowers on the mantel, looked at herself in the mirror, and did something to her hair. At half past eight she sat very still, frowning slightly and biting her lip. At quarter of nine her cheeks had reddened and she tapped the carpet with the toe of her shoe. And at nine o'clock her heart gave a jump and she forgot how near she had come to being angry. For the footsteps for which she had waited were coming up the walk.

"Hello!" It was Priscilla's voice. "Don't tell me I'm the first one."

"The others will be here in a minute," Ruth replied in an even voice. "Come right in and take off your coat, Priscilla, for this room's awfully warm."

Priscilla complied with her friend's suggestion, and glanced at her admiringly. She thought she [177]
had never seen Ruth look so pretty. "You've got a lovely color to-night," she exclaimed.

"It's just because it's so hot here. I always get flushed when I'm warm."

Priscilla was looking around the room as if in search of something. "Why, where's Nelson?"

"He'll be here right away. You know there are always so many things to be attended to in the last few minutes." But though Ruth gave this explanation with a matter-of-fact cheerfulness that deceived even Priscilla who knew her so well, she was seething inwardly. So this was all he cared. He had sacrificed their quiet hour together. Now there would be a crush and a crowd and everybody talking at once, and no chance to say any of the things she had saved up for their last evening.

Not that she cared. Ruth flung up her head and laughed gaily at something Priscilla was telling. Her hands were cold and her mouth felt very dry, and her heart was pounding furiously. Nelson could come when he was ready, and so that he didn't miss the train, it made no difference [178]
to her.

Amy and Bob were next to arrive. Then came Peggy and Graham. "Nelson's late, isn't he?" said Peggy with an uneasy glance at the clock. "He hasn't any time to spare."

"I'll put on my things so we'll all be ready to start when he gets here," Ruth returned casually. She had put on a little blue frock, of which Nelson was especially fond, for the last evening, and she was glad to conceal it by a long coat. Her hand trembled as she pinned her hat in place. She hoped Nelson Hallowell wasn't conceited enough to suppose she cared whether he came at one hour or another.

It was twenty minutes past nine when Nelson arrived, and he looked rather white and shaken. As he had left for camp two years before, his mother had stood smiling in the doorway to watch him go. When it was whispered that they were going across, and he had told her she was not likely to see him again till the war was over, she had kissed him with lips that did not tremble. But then she had been lifted above herself by the exalted spirits of the times. Now she had no [179]
sense of patriotic service to sustain her. She realized that she was no longer a young woman, that life was uncertain, and that her boy was going very far away. Over their last meal together she had broken down, and wept as Nelson had never seen his mother weep in all his life.

It is not to Nelson's discredit that he had forgotten Ruth. Or if that is saying too much, his thought of her was vague and shadowy. Nelson's father had died when he was a little boy, and through the years that he was growing to manhood, his mother and he had been everything to each other. The sight of her grief was torturing. He had put his arms about her, and comforted

her as best he could. He had offered to give up the whole thing, and had started to go out to telegraph his friend in Oklahoma that he was not coming. That, more than anything else, had helped her to regain her self-control. As mothers have been doing from time immemorial she wiped her wet eyes and tried to smile, that he might go on his great adventure without a shadow on his heart. Throughout that distressing, solemn, sacred time, it had never occurred to Nelson [180] to look at the clock. The thought of Ruth had hardly crossed his mind. Even on his way to her homo, he was still thinking of the mother he had left.

It was Graham who, hearing Nelson's step outside, rushed to admit him. Nelson entered, blinking a little in the bright light of the room, and speaking first to one and then another. Ruth in the corner by the fireplace was talking to Bob Carey, and was so interested that she only glanced in Nelson's direction, to toss him a smiling nod, and then resume her conversation with Bob. Nelson gave a little start as if some one had pinched him in the middle of a dream and he had suddenly awakened.

"Well, old man," remarked Graham cheerfully, "you haven't left yourself much leeway. It's just about time to start."

"I—yes, I suppose it is." Nelson looked in Ruth's direction and then looked quickly away. As for Ruth, she was so absorbed by what Bob Carey was saying, that her brother had to repeat his remark for her benefit. "Come, Ruth. Better get a move on. We haven't any time to waste." [181]

"Oh, is it really time to start?" Ruth asked carelessly. "I hadn't noticed." And with that fib on her conscience, she rose and joined the others.

Fond as Peggy was of Ruth, that evening she could have shaken her in her exasperation. For on the walk to the street-car, Ruth clung to her arm and chattered unceasingly. As Graham stuck doggedly to Peggy's other side and Bob was with Amy, Nelson and Priscilla found themselves walking together. But since Nelson was too dazed for speech, and Priscilla was wondering what Horace would say to this juxtaposition, they walked in an almost unbroken silence.

It was no better on the street car. Peggy maneuvered shamelessly to put Nelson and Ruth into the one vacant seat, but Ruth slipped past and took her seat beside a fat woman, who left so little space that Ruth was in imminent danger of falling into the aisle, whenever the car turned the corner. In Peggy's opinion such a catastrophe would have been no more than she deserved. [182] Peggy had to take the place she had designed for Ruth, and did her best to be agreeable, but Nelson's wandering replies showed the futility of her efforts.

A slight delay on the way brought them to the station less than ten minutes before train time. Nelson's tickets were bought, of course, and his reservations made. They stood in a group in the station waiting-room and said the aimless things people generally say five minutes before train-time. All but Ruth, that is. When Nelson looked at her he found her attention absorbed by an Italian family, whose bundles and babies occupied the nearest row of seats.

It was Graham who again took on himself the ungracious duty of calling Nelson's attention to the flight of time. "I guess you'd better go aboard, Nelson. You don't want to stand right here in the station, and miss the train."

Nelson started violently. "Oh, no," he replied, "certainly not." He turned to Bob Carey and shook hands with him, murmuring a mechanical good-by. Amy stood at Bob's side and Nelson held out his hand to her.

Amy had shared Peggy's feeling of vexation with Ruth, and like Peggy had resented her sense [183] of impotence. Neither one of them would have hesitated to take Ruth roundly to task for her conduct, but it was impossible to scold her in Nelson's presence, and after he had started on his long journey westward it would be too late. But as Amy looked into the young fellow's down-cast face, a brilliant inspiration came to her aid. She grasped his hand, pulled herself up on tiptoes, and kissed the astonished youth squarely on the lips. "Good-by, Nelson, and good luck."

Peggy, the next in line, saw her friend's ruse, and seconded her admirably. It was impossible to tell whether Nelson blushed at the second kiss, for the flaming color due to Amy's salute still dyed him crimson. Priscilla pushed aside the obtrusive thought of Horace, and backed up the others. And then Nelson came to Ruth.

For a moment Ruth had been in a quandary. After their warm friendship, to part with Nelson with a formal handshake when the other girls had kissed him, would be to proclaim publicly that [184] she was angry, and Ruth did not wish to seem angry, but only indifferent. And yet if she kissed Nelson good-by, she had a suspicion that the barrier her pride had built between them would melt like mist in the sun. She raised her eyes and met his, those honest eyes in which she read bewilderment and grief and appeal and something greater than all. And then, all at once, her resentment seemed incomprehensibly petty. Whatever the reason that Nelson had come late, it was not because he did not care. And so their first kiss was exchanged in the garish light of a railway waiting-room, with the calls of the trainmen blending with the unmelodious crying of babies, with travelers coming and going, and a little circle of friends standing by and taking everything in. But there are some experiences it is impossible to spoil.

"SHE RAISED HER EYES AND MET HIS"

"All aboard," cried Graham, and carried Nelson away. Ruth slipped her arms through Peggy's, and turned toward the door, swallowing hard at something that refused to be swallowed.

"If ever a girl deserved a scolding!" said Peggy in the tenderest tones imaginable. "But I'm not going to do it now, because at the last minute you redeemed yourself—thanks to Amy." [185]

CHAPTER XIII [186]

PEGGY GIVES A DINNER PARTY

Ruth moped after Nelson's departure. Just how much her depression was due to missing him, and how much was the result of self-reproach, she could not have told. Each time she realized his absence she remembered with a pang the hurt wonder of his face that night in the station. It did not help matters that Nelson seemed to consider himself entirely to blame for what had happened, and had written her from the train a most humble apology for failing to be at her home at eight o'clock as he had promised. In fact, his assumption that she could not possibly be in the wrong only made Ruth the more conscious of her pettiness.

It was largely on Ruth's account that Peggy resolved on her dinner party. For after scolding Ruth soundly, and giving her to understand that she was very much ashamed of her, Peggy had set herself resolutely to cheer her despondent friend. On the Friday following Nelson's departure [187] something went wrong with the heating plant at college, and the classes were dismissed at ten o'clock. At once Peggy determined to celebrate.

"Father and mother have gone away for the week end, and Dick's going home with his chum after school, and I shan't see him till bed-time. Come to dinner all of you. We'll have an old-fashioned good time."

The recipients of this invitation accepted promptly. They were in the rather hilarious mood which for some reason characterizes the most ambitious student when school is dismissed for the day, college seniors as well as kindergarten tots. "Only you must let us come over and help you," stipulated Ruth.

"Yes, come on, and then if anything doesn't turn out well, I can blame some of you. I wonder—do you know, I've half a mind to invite Hildegarde Carey."

The others approved, especially Priscilla who had a great admiration for Bob's attractive sister.

"She took us out that evening, you know," Peggy continued. "She's always been awfully sweet to me and I've never done anything for her. The only thing—well, I feel a little bit afraid of her." [188]

"I'll testify that she can eat a very simple meal and seem to enjoy it." And Amy chuckled as she always did when she recalled the first time Hildegarde had sat at her table.

Peggy laughed understandingly. "I think I'll ask her. I've always thought it was a sort of snobbishness to be ashamed to give your best to people who have more than you do. Though I'm

not sure that a party of girls will appeal to her."

Apparently she had misjudged Hildegarde. For the latter's tone, when she responded to Peggy's invitation given over the phone a few minutes later, was unmistakably enthusiastic.

"A dinner party and just girls! How cute! I'd adore to come, Peggy, but would it put you out if I brought my friend Virginia Dunbar? She's a New York girl who's making me a little visit and she's perfectly fascinating."

"Why, bring her of course. I shall love to meet her." Peggy's hospitality rendered her response [189]
sufficiently fervent, but as she hung up the receiver, her face wore a thoughtful expression. The little dinner party, which had seemed pure fun when her three chums were her prospective guests, had become a responsibility, as soon as Hildegarde was added to the number. And with a New York girl coming, it seemed distinctly formidable.

It had not previously occurred to Peggy that the house was not in suitable order for the reception of guests, but now as she looked about the dining-room its shortcomings were painfully evident. She donned a long apron and a sweeping cap, and set resolutely to work. When the dining room was swept and garnished, the living room across the hall suffered comparison, and Peggy gave that equally careful attention. And as by this time she was on her mettle, she went to work cleaning the silver. The twelve o'clock whistles surprised her in this exacting task, and she swallowed a peanut-butter sandwich by way of luncheon, promising herself to make up for this abstemiousness at dinner, Peggy was not one of the temperamental cooks who cannot enjoy their [190]
own cooking.

At half past one she hurried forth with her market basket to make the necessary purchases. She left by the back door and took the key with her. A little after two she was back again, the loaded basket on her arm. Peggy set her burden down, rubbed her aching muscles, and felt in her coat pocket for the key. Then she felt in the other pocket. Then she continued to search one pocket and then the other, with increasing evidences of consternation. But it was of no use. The key was gone.

"I must have had it in my hand and laid it down on the counter somewhere," thought Peggy. "Was ever anything so exasperating." She left the basket outside the locked door, and hurriedly retraced her steps. The butcher, whom she had visited first, shook his head in answer to her question. No, he had not seen a stray door-key. It was the same at the grocer's, the same at the bakery where she had bought Parker-house rolls. Peggy walked home over the route she had traversed, her eyes glued to the side-walk, but she did not find the key. [191]

Ruth was waiting for her by the front steps. "I thought I'd come over and help you. I hope you haven't finished everything."

"I haven't even started," replied Peggy in a hollow voice, and explained the situation. Ruth was a girl of resources and at once she had a bright idea.

"Peggy, our front door key looks a good bit like yours. Perhaps it will open the door. I'll run over and get it."

"Then, fly," pleaded Peggy, "It's simply awful to be locked out of your house when you have a million things to do."

Ruth sped on her errand at a pace which satisfied even the impatient Peggy, and returned with a key which really did look like the latch key with whose appearance Peggy was most familiar. Hopefully she inserted it in the appropriate key-hole. Patiently she turned it this way and that. The latch key was like a great many people, encouraging one's expectations by almost doing what it was asked to do, but never quite succeeding. In the end Peggy mournfully relinquished all hope [192]
of entering the house by its aid.

"I can't waste any more time on that key. It won't work, and I've got to get in."

"How about the windows," suggested Ruth.

"The windows on the first floor are all locked, for I made sure of that before I started out."

"If we could borrow a ladder—"

"I don't know anybody who owns a ladder. No, there's just one chance as far as I can see. I've always wondered if I could get in through the coal shute and now I'm going to see."

"But, Peggy, it's so dirty."

"I know, but it's got to be done."

"You might get stuck," exclaimed Ruth, turning pale. "Wait a little, Peggy. Perhaps something will happen."

"Unless an air ship comes along and takes me to a second story window, I can't think of anything that could happen that would be of any help to me."

The narrow, inclined passage through which the coal was chuted from the side walk to the cellar bin, looked small enough and black enough to justify Ruth's forebodings. But Peggy's [193]
impatience had reached the point where anything seemed better than inaction. She lowered

herself into the chute, and when she released her hold of the edge, her descent was so rapid that Ruth shrieked. But after a moment of suspense she heard an encouraging rattle of coal, and then steps slowly ascending the cellar steps. A little later the front door was shaken violently without opening, however, and Peggy's face presently appeared at one of the living-room windows. Regardless of the fact that her friend was attempting to tell her something, Ruth screamed with laughter, for Peggy's face was so begrimed as to suggest that her habitual occupation was that of a chimney-sweep. Ruth's laughter was short-lived, however, for raising her voice, Peggy made herself heard, and with an accent of authority by no means characteristic.

"Stop laughing, Ruth, and help me. In fooling with your key I've done something to that wretched lock, and now I can't open the door even from the inside."

"The front door?"

"I can't open either door," cried Peggy. "I can't open *any* door. The only way to get into the [194]
house is by the window, and Hildegarde Carey is coming to dinner and a girl from New York."

"What do you want me to do, Peggy?" Ruth was so carried away by her friend's excitement that for the moment she was unable to see anything humorous in the situation.

"Bring me my market basket, first. It's on the back steps. And then find a locksmith and bring him here. Don't be satisfied with having him say he'll come. Bring him with you."

Ruth hurried to the back of the house, secured the heavy basket, and returned with it to the living room window. And then she astonished Peggy by setting the basket down and beginning to laugh hysterically.

"What on earth—"

"Oh, Peggy, please excuse me. I really didn't mean to laugh, but honestly you're the funniest sight I've ever seen. You're striped just like a zebra."

Curiosity led Peggy to consult the mirror over the mantel. But instead of laughing as Ruth had [195]
done, she uttered a tragic groan.

"It's going to take a terrible time to clean that off, if it ever does come off. Oh, Ruth, hurry! When I think of all that will have to be done before six o'clock, my head just whirls."

Ruth took a hasty departure and Peggy, having carried the basket to the kitchen, rushed upstairs to remove all traces of her recent novel entry. As this necessitated an entire change of clothing and the use of a prodigious amount of soap and hot water, her toilet consumed more time than she could well spare. But at length, clean and extremely pink, and attired in a little frock not too good for getting dinner and yet good enough to pass muster at the table, she rushed downstairs and attacked her vegetables. And still no sign of Ruth, bringing the locksmith.

About five o'clock Priscilla arrived ready to lend a hand. Peggy answered her ring at the window, instead of at the door, and after a brief conversation, the tall Priscilla made an unconventional entry. Amy arriving twenty minutes later was admitted by the same entrance. The girls made themselves useful and speculated on what was detaining Ruth. [196]

"I don't mind letting you girls in through the window," groaned Peggy. "But it's different with Hildegarde. And that New York girl. Oh, heavens!"

At five o'clock they were all too nervous to know what they were doing. Peggy set skillets on the stove with nothing in them, and snatched them off again, just in time to avert disaster. She salted vegetables and then forgot and salted them all over again. Priscilla was trying to set the table, and making a poor job of it, as is generally the case when one is doing one thing and thinking of another. Amy, after going to the front window on the average of once in every two minutes to see if Ruth were coming, felt that she could bear inaction no longer.

"Peggy, where's the latch key to your front door?"

"Hanging on a hook over by the umbrellas. But you can't do anything with it. I've tried."

"What a key has done a key can undo," replied Amy, sententiously; and possessing herself of the magic piece of steel, she climbed out of the window and set to work. For fifteen or twenty [197]
minutes she continued to fumble at the lock without results, and she was on the point of deciding that she might be putting in the time to better advantage, when something clicked encouragingly. Amy turned the knob, and squealed with delight; for the door opened.

Before she could proclaim her success, Priscilla had made a discovery. Lying across a chair in the kitchen was a garment of some indeterminate shade between blue and black. "What's this?" asked Priscilla, pausing to examine it.

"It's my old blue coat. But since I came down the coal chute, I don't know as I can ever wear it again. It isn't worth sending to the cleaner's, and I'm afraid it's beyond my skill."

"I'll hang it in the laundry," said Priscilla, and lifted the smutty garment daintily by the tips of her fingers. The coat swung against the round of the chair with a distinct clink, and Peggy looked up quickly. "What was that?"

"A button, wasn't it?"

"The buttons are cloth. And that was such a queer sound—like metal."

Priscilla had a brilliant idea. Disregarding the fact that the coal dust with which the garment [198] was covered came off on her hands, she began eagerly feeling along the lower edge. And just as Amy heard the click that meant victory, Priscilla uttered an ecstatic cry.

"The key, Peggy! I've found your key!"

"What? Where? Oh, Priscilla, not really?"

"There must have been a hole in your pocket," declared Priscilla. "The key slipped down between the outside and the lining. You can feel for yourself. There's a key all right, and it's not likely it's a different one."

"Take a knife and rip up the lining at the bottom," ordered Peggy recklessly. "Yes, of course it's the key. I wonder if I'd rather have that New York girl come in by the back door or the front window."

That query had hardly left her lips, when Amy rushed in. "I've done it, Peggy, I've done it."

"You don't mean you've got the door open?"

"Yes, I have. I was just ready to give up and then I tried again and something clicked and the deed was done."

"And Priscilla's found the back-door key. Now Ruth will come with the locksmith." [199]

They heard footsteps even as she spoke, and then Ruth's voice explaining to the locksmith that the only way to get into the house was by the window. Peggy went to meet them, assuming a very dignified air that she might not look sheepish.

"We succeeded in opening the doors that were troubling us, but there's a key broken off in a lock upstairs. Since you're here, you might as well attend to that. Will you take him upstairs Ruth? It's the door of the den." And then Peggy beat a retreat to the kitchen, leaving Ruth to propitiate the locksmith, who had left his shop reluctantly, yielding to her impassioned representations of the urgency of the case.

Dinner was more than half an hour late, and failed to justify Peggy's reputation as a cook, for some dishes were over-salted and others entirely lacking that essential ingredient, while the pudding was so overdone that it was necessary to remove the top layer, and conceal deficiencies by a quite superfluous meringue. But since Peggy had planned her dinner party with the purpose [200] of distracting Ruth's thoughts, she had every reason to consider it an unqualified success.

CHAPTER XIV [201]

AT THE FOOT-BALL GAME

THE foot-ball season was on. It had opened auspiciously when the university had crushingly defeated the visitors, and the attendance upon the second game showed that the public anticipated a similar victory. Priscilla, sitting demurely beside Horace Hitchcock, was a-tingle with excitement. Not for the world would she have allowed Horace to guess how momentous the occasion seemed.

The tiers of seats gave a dazzling effect of color. Pennants and flags and the bright-colored hats of the girls made Priscilla think of terraces covered with flowers. Every one was talking, almost drowning out the noisy efforts of the 'varsity band. It seemed to Priscilla an unfitting time to quote Schopenhauer, but the Schopenhauer pose was Horace's latest, and it recognized neither time nor seasons.

Priscilla leaned impulsively across Horace to wave to Amy, whose good-humored face had [202] suddenly differentiated itself from the mass of surrounding faces. Horace interrupted in the midst of a peculiarly pessimistic utterance, looked frankly vexed, and Priscilla apologized. "Excuse me, I just happened to see Amy."

"It is not a surprise to me, Priscilla, to find you uninterested. It is the fate of some souls to be solitary. Once I had hoped—but it doesn't matter."

Priscilla's mood was a little perverse. "Perhaps the reason you're solitary is that you choose such unpleasant paths. If you'd only walk where it was nice and sunny, you'd have plenty of company."

"Plenty of company! Heavens!" Horace shuddered. "That suggests the crowd. It is bad enough for the body to be jostled, but at least the spirit can command unhampered space. I had dreamed once that you might follow me to the heights where the atmosphere is too rare for the multitude, but—Why do we cling to life, when each hour that passes shatters another illusion?"

"I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment, Horace," Priscilla bit her lip. She was young and eager. [203] She wanted passionately to be happy. She longed to respond to the charm of the hour, to enjoy it ardently, and instead she was obliged to listen to quotations from Schopenhauer, and think of

Horace's lost illusions. The thought crossed her mind that since she could not make Horace happy even for an afternoon, and since he was certainly not making her so, it promised ill for the future. If only Horace could be brought to see that they had made a mistake. A little flutter of hope stirred in Priscilla's heart.

Horace was speaking in a tone of extreme bitterness. "Blessed is the man who expects nothing from life, for he shall not be disappointed."

"Horace," began Priscilla firmly. "Don't you think that we—I mean wouldn't it be better—"

A number of people were coming into the vacant places on her left. A young man seated himself beside Priscilla, and involuntarily she turned. Then she gave an impulsive start and her ready color flamed up. The young man, who wore glasses, also started and after an almost [204] imperceptible hesitation lifted his hat. Simultaneously Priscilla bowed in the most unresponsive fashion possible, and looked away.

Horace stared suspiciously at her flushed cheeks. Horace had never heard the story of the supper at the Green Parrot, and the fragment of roll that had sought to drown itself in the stranger's coffee-cup. If Priscilla had ever taken him into her confidence, he might have guessed the explanation of her present embarrassment. As it was, he leaned close and said in her ear, "Who is that fellow?"

"Sh! I'll tell you afterward."

Poor Priscilla! The game to which she had looked forward had become an impossible nightmare. Horace's philosophical pursuits had not freed him from that ready jealousy which is the characteristic of small natures. He sat glowering across Priscilla's shoulder at the young man seated on her left. As it was impossible to misunderstand Horace's expression, the young man, after his first recognition of Priscilla's presence, obligingly ignored her.

The finishing of the first half was an enormous relief to Priscilla. The majority of the seats in [205] the grand-stand were immediately vacated. The flower bed had become kaleidoscopic, with the bits of color continually rearranging themselves, as laughing girls and glowing youths moved about, excitedly discussing the points of the game they had witnessed. But though Priscilla was so ardent a fan, she knew little of the game and cared less.

The young man at her left had been one of the first to rise. As he moved away, Priscilla turned to Horace, and without giving herself time to be frightened by his forbidding expression, she told him the story of her first and only visit to the Green Parrot.

After she had finished, Horace seemed to be waiting for more. "Do you mean that is all?" he demanded at length.

"All? Of course it's all."

"Then why did you blush that way?"

The red went out of Priscilla's cheeks. Even the color due to the frostiness of the outdoor air was replaced by an angry pallor. "Do you mean," she said in a level voice, "that you don't believe me?"

"A fellow crowds in and sits down beside you, a fellow I've never seen. You recognize each [206] other and then you turn crimson. You refuse to give me any explanation till enough time has elapsed for fabricating a story, plausible from your point of view—"

"Horace!"

"And you then tell me a yarn that is no explanation whatever. What if a piece of roll did fly out of your hand and fall into somebody's coffee cup! What is there in that to turn you all colors of the rainbow? You're stringing me, that's all." The Horace who quoted Schopenhauer, and talked like the hero of a society novel, had magically disappeared, and in his place was a slangy young man, very much like other young men in a bad temper.

"Horace," said Priscilla, her lips trembling, "I've been afraid for a long time that we'd made a mistake. I can't seem to please you, no matter how hard I try, and probably it won't surprise you to know that I've been perfectly miserable for the last six months. And it seems to me the best thing we can do—"

The people were beginning to come back to their seats. A couple just in front of Horace and [207] Priscilla turned to scream something to a row of young people back of them. Priscilla tightened her grip on her self control and looked straight ahead. It was not the time nor place for breaking an engagement. She must wait till she could get away from this noisy, laughing crowd. Oh, if only the dreadful afternoon were over.

The university triumphed again, as its friends had anticipated. There was the usual tumultuous cheering, the usual frantic demonstrations. Priscilla gave Horace the benefit of a frigid profile. Her sense of indignity kept her sternly silent. He had accused her of lying, and that meant all was over between them. Underneath her hurt and humiliation was a sense of relief she refused to acknowledge even to herself. Fortunately the young man in eye-glasses did not return to take the vacant place at Priscilla's left, and the situation was not further complicated by his embarrassing presence.

She stood up as the crowd rose, thankful for the prospect of escape. Horace put his hand lightly on her arm. "Wouldn't you like something hot to drink?" he asked. "Chocolate or coffee?" His tone was caressing. [208]

"I don't want anything except to get home."

"Then we'll go home, little girl. I only thought you might be chilled sitting here in the cold so long."

He spoke with placid tenderness, as if their quarrel belonged to the Babylonian era of their acquaintance. Priscilla cast a frightened glance at him. She felt like a fly, partially disentangling itself from the spider's web, only to find itself again mysteriously ensnared. "Don't, Horace," she exclaimed impulsively.

"Don't what, Priscilla?"

"Don't talk as if nothing had happened. If you believe that I'm a liar—"

"My dear girl, don't be absurd. We'd better not talk till you're calmer."

"I'm as calm as I'm likely to be when I'm talking of this, Horace. If you think it a little thing to doubt my word, I don't agree with you."

He took her arm and bent down till his face was very close to hers. "Can't you make allowances, Priscilla, for a man crazed with love and jealousy?" [209]

"You haven't any right—" Her voice broke in a sob. She fought desperately against the tears that placed her, she vaguely realized, at such a serious disadvantage, but they were too much for her. They splashed down on her white cheeks, and the couples crowding past glanced at her curiously.

"Forgive me, Priscilla. I accept your explanation. I ask your forgiveness. I am at your feet."

She was lost and she knew it, but she struggled nevertheless. "We've made a mistake. We're not happy, either of us. It's better to stop now than later."

"Priscilla—are you in love with him?"

Horace's tone had changed magically. It was no longer tenderly matter-of-fact, but tragic, desperate. She stared at him aghast. "In love—why, what, do you mean?"

"With that man who sat beside you to-day, the man who did not dare come back and face me."

"Horace,—why, Horace, you must be crazy. I told you I had never seen him but once before, and I told you what happened then." [210]

Her disclaimer did not afford him any especial relief. He was muttering to himself. She caught the words, "As well now as later," and fear gripped her heart. He did not directly address her till they had left the field behind, and were no longer surrounded by the laughing, buoyant throng.

"I have foreseen this, Priscilla. I have known that happiness was not for me. But I have tried to shut my eyes to the truth, to hope for the impossible. Now you have thrown me away like a ripped glove—"

"Horace, I didn't." Even at this tragic moment the thought crossed Priscilla's mind that instead of throwing away a ripped glove as worthless, she would sit down conscientiously to mend it. She brushed aside the reflection as unworthy the occasion and hurried on, "It isn't that. But if we can't be happy now, if we're always irritating and hurting each other—"

"You don't need to say more, Priscilla. You are weary of me. I had dreamed I had found a soul capable of constancy—but no matter. This is good-by, Priscilla. I cannot live without you. When you take away your love from me, you take away all that makes life endurable. All I ask now is forgetfulness, and only death can promise me that—Good-by, Priscilla." [211]

Poor Priscilla! She should have known better. Long before she had discovered Horace's weakness for posing. It was no secret to her that he experienced the keenest satisfaction in contemplating the ravages wrought in his nature by successive disillusionments. Yet though she understood, at this crisis her good sense failed her. In spite of herself, she interpreted Horace's speech by her own sincerity, and a chill terror took possession of her. He would kill himself and she would be to blame. Although the law would not recognize her crime, at the bar of her own conscience she would be adjudged guilty of murder.

"Horace," she wailed, "you did not understand me. I want to make you happy, that's all. If you think we haven't made a mistake, I'm satisfied."

It took a long time to reassure Horace. It was so hard to explain matters satisfactorily that it almost seemed as if he were stupid or else wilfully perverse. Much of the time he stared blankly ahead, so lost in gloomy reflections that she had to speak his name twice, before she could attract his attention. His lips moved, too, but without a sound, as if he were saying things too dreadful to be heard. Altogether Priscilla suffered intolerably before she could bring the unhappy young man to reconsider his desperate purpose. [212]

At last she was partially successful. He became calm enough to listen to her repeated

assurances that all she thought of was his happiness and, though his mood was still sober when they parted, he had given a half-hearted and reluctant promise that he would surrender, for the present at least, all thought of doing away with the life he valued so lightly.

Priscilla was not sure how she got through the rest of the day. Her mother noticed her abstraction and speculated hopefully as to whether she had quarreled with Horace. While Priscilla's parents had never been let into the secret of the engagement, they could not be [213] unaware of the significance of Horace's attentions. Like most American fathers and mothers, they believed a girl should be allowed to choose her own friends, unless there was some decided reason to oppose her choice. Although neither of them liked Horace, the reasons for their prejudice were too vague and too personal to constitute a ground for opposing the intimacy. Moreover, both of Priscilla's parents were of the opinion that if she saw enough of the young man she would tire of the mannerisms they found so objectionable.

It was not till Priscilla was safe in bed that she dared relieve her over-burdened heart by tears. And as she lay sobbing with the coverlet over her head, she solemnly relinquished all hope of happiness in this world.

"It was my vanity that got me into this," lamented Priscilla. "I didn't like to feel I was less attractive than the other girls and so I fairly snatched at Horace. Now I've got to stand by my promise if it kills me, but Oh, how am I going to bear it!"

So Priscilla cried herself to sleep. And there was an added poignancy in her grief as she [214] remembered that the Combs family was notably long-lived, boasting some distant ancestors who had rounded out a full century of existence.

CHAPTER XV [215]

THE CURE

They were out for a walk one Saturday evening, Peggy and Amy, with Graham and Bob in attendance, when in front of a little movie theater, Peggy stopped short. A young couple stood at the ticket booth, the girl giggling vacuously as the very slender youth fumbled in his pockets for the price of admission. Peggy's abrupt halt was not due to the charm of the flaring poster, representing a fat woman with a broom in pursuit of a thin man attired in a bath-robe. Her attention was absorbed by the young couple, who were planning to enjoy the show. For while she had never seen the girl before, the slender youth was her younger brother, Dick.

As the two disappeared behind the swinging doors, Peggy turned to her companions. "Think you could stand it?" She indicated the poster by a gesture, and Bob Carey, who did not have the [216] pleasure of Dick's acquaintance, looked surprised, while Graham's face wore an expression of doubt.

"I've seen just as bad, Peggy, and still survive," Graham said. "But I hardly think—"

"Of course we can stand it, if you'd like to go in, Peggy," interrupted Amy. And Bob, though evidently puzzled by Peggy's taste moved quickly forward to purchase the tickets, thus getting ahead of Graham who was still inclined to remonstrate. Graham understood that Peggy was not especially pleased to discover Dick in company with a girl she knew nothing about, especially since her manner had made anything but a favorable impression in the few seconds she had been under observation. But Dick, while considerably short of his majority, was old enough to resent interference in his affairs, and Graham could not see that Peggy would gain anything by trying to play detective.

The film which constituted the evening's entertainment was exceptionally poor. The comedy was of the atrocious, slap-stick sort that moves the judicious almost to tears while the feature [217] play, a melodrama only saved from being a tragedy by an inconsistently happy ending, was frequently so overdone as to be extremely funny. Peggy paid comparatively little attention to the drama as it unrolled before her eyes. First of all she set herself to locate Dick and his companion, and then to evolve a plan of action suited to the requirements of the case.

Graham spoke confidentially in her ear. "Don't worry, Peggy. Every boy has his silly times. I did myself." Graham's manner suggested that he was speaking from the vantage-point of discreet middle age.

"Yes, I know." Peggy did not mean her answer just as it sounded. She was simply thinking of something else. Graham stared at the inane chase, unfolding on the screen, where a procession of people ran into everything imaginable from a peanut vendor's cart to an express train, and presently tried again. "You want to be careful, Peggy. He's just at the age to resent your trying to manage him."

"Yes, I know," whispered Peggy again. She was fully as alive as Graham to the necessity of [218] tact. But she was aware, too, that all boys do not pass through the silly stage as unscathed as Graham had done. All the loyal sister in her was alert.

They sat through the depressing comedy and the amusing tragedy, and then suddenly Peggy

rose. She had seen Dick on ahead getting to his feet. In the darkness of the picture house there was no danger he would recognize her. Indeed it was unlikely that he would have seen her even if the lights had been turned on, so engrossed was he by the plump little person whose head barely reached his shoulder.

Peggy and her party were outside first. All unaware of the ambush, Dick came blundering on. He was talking fast and the girl was giggling approval. Peggy saw that she was all she had feared. Her round cheeks were rouged so as to give an excellent imitation of a pair of Baldwin apples. Between the crimson circles her nose gleamed ludicrously white, suggesting a very recent use of her powder puff. Her bobbed hair, together with her diminutive frame, gave her a childish air, contradicted by the shrewdness of her eyes. Peggy guessed that Dick's friend was considerably his senior, probably not far from her own age. [219]

Dick was laughing rather boisterously at one of his own witticisms, when Peggy touched his arm. "Hello, Dick!" Her tone was nonchalant, but Dick started, straightened himself and flushed angrily. All his masculine pride was up in arms at the thought of coercion. But Peggy's matter-of-fact air partly allayed his suspicions.

"We sat about six rows back of you," she explained. "Dick, you haven't met Mr. Carey, have you? My brother, Richard, Bob."

The two shook hands and Dick realized that reciprocity was in order. Under the most favorable circumstances, performing the ceremony of introduction was to Dick an agonizing ordeal, and the present situation increased his inevitable embarrassment a hundred fold. He was the color of a ripe tomato as he blurted out, "Miss Coffin, let me introduce you to my sister—Miss Raymond—and Miss—Miss——" He had forgotten Amy's name after having known it all his life, and Peggy came to the rescue, and introduced the others.

Whatever Dick's feeling in regard to the meeting, it was clear that Miss Coffin was not displeased. She fixed a hypnotic gaze on Bob Carey as she exclaimed, "Fierce name, isn't it! But take it from me, I'm no dead one, Coffin or no coffin." [220]

Peggy's smile gave no hint of her inward anguish. "We're just going home to have some oysters. Won't you and Dick come along, Miss Coffin?"

Graham had difficulty in choking down an impatient exclamation. What was Peggy thinking of? It was bad enough for Dick to be associating with a girl of this sort, but for Peggy to encourage him in his folly by welcoming the girl to her home, the first time she had ever seen her, impressively illustrated the feminine incapacity to act reasonably in a crisis. While it was impossible to put his disapproval into words, Graham's manner left little unexpressed.

Dick looked as if he agreed with Graham, but Peggy had not addressed herself to him. And as for Miss Coffin, Peggy's invitation was responsible for a marked increase in her sprightliness. "Eats!" she cried dramatically, "Oh, boy! Lead me to it!" [221]

They went down the street in the direction of Friendly Terrace, Miss Coffin chattering animatedly at Dick's elbow, and speaking loudly enough to be heard easily by the others. Indeed, there was ground for supposing that she was willing to allow her vivacious conversation to make an impression on more important listeners than Dick. Her youthful escort, stalking awkwardly at her side, was almost as silent as Graham who walked on ahead with Peggy. But the silence of her brother and her lover, even though it implied criticism and displeasure, seemingly failed to shadow Peggy's spirits. She turned her head every now and then to address a remark to Dick's companion, and Miss Coffin showed her appreciation of the friendly attitude by the request that she "cut out the formal stuff." "You kids are the kind that can call me Mazie," she chirruped, apparently under the impression that she was addressing some one at a considerable distance.

It was perhaps as well for the success of Peggy's plan that neither her father nor her mother were at home. She ushered her guests into the living room and insisted on their laying aside their wraps. Mazie Coffin having removed her hat, went straight as a homing pigeon to the mirror over the mantel, and made an unabashed and quite unnecessary use of her powder puff. [222]

"You're coming out to help me, aren't you, Amy?" Peggy inquired casually. "I thought I'd fix little pigs-in-blankets, you know. They're awfully good, but rather fussy."

"Why, of course I'll help," responded Amy, wondering if Mazie, also, would be called on to render assistance. But apparently Peggy's acquaintance with Mazie had not progressed to that point of informality. "We'll try not to be any longer than we can help," she smiled, "and we'll leave you to amuse one another till we're ready."

Out in the kitchen as they wrapped fat oysters in blankets of bacon, pinning the latter in place with wooden tooth-picks, the two girls exchanged significant glances. "What's the idea?" Amy asked, with the frankness of long friendship.

"Well, I'm not sure that it will do any good. But I've got an idea—Don't you know that the impression a thing makes on you depends a lot on the background?" [223]

"Hm! I don't quite understand what you mean."

"Well, if you see a girl on the stage with a skirt nine inches long, it doesn't make the same impression on you that it would if you saw her in your own home."

"No, it doesn't."

"Dick's been used to nice people all his life," Peggy went on, plainly trying to encourage herself as well as to explain matters to Amy. "A girl like this might attract his attention if he saw her behind the counter of a cigar store—"

"Does she work in a cigar store?"

"I haven't the least idea. I only meant she wouldn't seem particularly out of place in a tobacco shop. But here in our home—Oh, it seems as though Dick must see how cheap and tawdry she is."

Amy skewered a particularly juicy oyster with a vicious thrust of the tooth pick. "Hope so, [224]
anyway," she said, and felt an exasperated desire to box Dick's ears.

But when Peggy had left the field to Mazie Coffin, she had builded better than she knew, Mazie had accepted the responsibility of entertaining the masculine portion of the company with extreme complacency. Never for a moment had she doubted her ability to make a favorable impression. As she gave her smiling attention to the trio, her late escort occupied a very small fraction of her thoughts. Dick was only a boy, a boy to whom shaving was still a novel art, and whose voice cracked ludicrously in moments of excitement. But Graham and Bob were young men, and good looking young men at that. Mazie hoped that the girls would not hurry with the oysters.

As this young woman's methods were not characterized by subtlety, it was not long before Dick realized that he was being disregarded. Mazie had eyes only for his seniors. She had begun by saying, as the door closed behind Peggy and Amy, "Gee, but they're trusting! How do they know that I won't vamp you two guys!" And when Dick, resenting his new rôle of unnoticed on-looker, [225]
had attempted to bear his part in the conversation, Mazie had silenced him with a jocose, "What are you butting in for, kid? Children must be seen and not heard, you know."

Dick Raymond was by no means a bad boy, and he was just as far from being a stupid boy. Mazie's conversational advances, as she had weighed out peanut brittle and caramels in quarter pound lots, had flattered his vanity. Dick was not accustomed to being regarded as a young man, and Mazie's manner of considering him worth-while game had naturally convinced him that she was a girl of exceptional insight. But now as she made eyes at Graham and smiled at Bob, the conviction seized Dick that her previous attentions had been due to the fact that he was the only one of his kind within reach. As was natural, the discovery made him critical. He noticed the harshness of Mazie's voice, the vacuity of her giggle. Her repetition of cheap slang began to jar on him, even though he was himself a similar offender. He looked distrustfully at the crimson cheeks, with the powdered nose gleaming whitely between. "I'll be 'jiggered if it doesn't look [226]
exactly like a marshmallow," he told himself.

The possibility that Dick's mood was critical did not trouble Mazie. She had looked Peggy and Amy over with the complacent certainty of her superior charms. Dick's sister wasn't a bad looker, Mazie owned condescendingly, but she was slow, dead slow, and nowadays the fellows liked plenty of pep. Mazie prided herself, not without reason, on having an abundance of that essential quality. She was sorry when the fragrance of frying bacon and coffee greeted her nostrils. Though Graham was stiffly polite and Bob Carey plainly amused, she would have been glad of a little more time.

The impromptu supper in the dining-room completed Dick's disillusionment. Determined not to yield any advantage she had gained Mazie continued to take the lead in the conversation. She gestured freely and frequently with the hand which held her fork, even with an oyster impaled on the tines. She drank her coffee noisily. Once, Dick was sure, he saw Bob choke down a laugh, though he made a pretence of coughing behind his napkin. And it was not, Dick was certain, [227]
because he found her amusing, but because he thought her ridiculous. Dick glared furiously at the averted shoulder of his erst-while charmer. Mazie had elected to treat him like a little boy, but if she had listened to him, thought Dick, he could have kept her from making a fool of herself.

Mazie seemed willing to linger, even after Amy and Bob had taken their departure. "Guess we might as well be starting," suggested Dick, his thoughts upon the probable return of his father and mother, rather than on his responsibility as host.

"Getting sleepy aren't you, little boy?" mocked Mazie. "Don't let me keep you from your downy. I can get home somehow," and she glanced significantly at Graham, whose good looks, for all his air of reserve, had made a strong impression on her susceptible temperament.

When at length she left under the escort of a frankly sulky Dick, she turned back to remind Graham that he could always find her in Streeter's Sweet Shop between the hours of nine and [228]
five. And then she took Dick's arm, and went out the door, smiling back coquettishly over her shoulder.

Graham hardly waited for them to be out of hearing before he exploded. The evening had been a great disappointment, and while Graham would have resented any outside suggestion that Peggy came short of absolute perfection, there were times when he felt himself quite capable of pointing out her errors in judgment. Peggy's painstaking explanation failed to enlighten him, and while Peggy thought Graham the most wonderful of men, in this instance she found him disappointingly slow of comprehension. They did not quarrel, but they kept on arguing the question long after it was clear that neither would be able to take the other's point of view. They

were still arguing when Dick returned.

Dick was in that state of irritation when scolding somebody seems an indispensable luxury. "See here, Peggy, just because you see me with a girl, you don't have to start right in and invite her to the house."

"Why, Dick, I thought—"

"Sometimes a fellow asks a girl out just so he can size her up. And if he finds that she's a [229] blamed idiot, he don't want her mixed up with his family. You mean all right, Peggy, but you don't understand life the way Graham and I do. I don't want you to have anything more to do with Mazie Coffin, Peggy. She's not the sort of girl for you to associate with. You can ask Graham about it if you don't believe me."

And as Dick stalked off to bed, ill tempered and aggrieved and abnormally dignified, even Graham was obliged to admit that it looked like a cure.

CHAPTER XVI [230]
DELIVERANCE

Priscilla had seen Horace only once since the football game, and then for a short and unsatisfactory interview. Immediately after, Horace had left town for one of those trips which so cleverly combined business and pleasure, a combination of which Horace seemed to have the secret. A long letter which might have been an excerpt from the Journal of Another Disappointed Man gave her no address to which to write him, and the best she could do was to promise herself to be very, very kind to Horace on his return. She owed him that for the wrong she had done him.

The days went by without any further word from Horace, and Friday rounded out a full week since she had last seen him. Priscilla and Peggy walked home from class together with that sense of leisure Friday afternoon brings to each student, no matter how much must be done before [231] Monday morning. They paused at Peggy's door and Peggy urged hospitably, "Come on in."

"I think I'd better go home and see if mother's there, and if she wants anything. We haven't seen our maid for three days."

"Well, we've *seen* Sally, if that's any comfort," laughed Peggy. "But she's been about as much good as if she'd been at the North Pole. A woman she knows was knocked down by an automobile and taken to the hospital, and all Sally has been good for since is to dramatize the affair. First she's the automobile speeding recklessly on, and then she's the poor victim. You never saw anything so realistic as the way she drops on the kitchen floor."

Priscilla laughed, but disapprovingly. "I don't see how you folks put up with her, Peggy. She'd drive me crazy."

"Well, there's no denying she's a trial at times, but Sally has her good points. She's devoted to us all, for one thing, and that isn't very common these days. And besides," added Peggy simply, "if we didn't keep her I don't know how the poor thing would get along."

The two girls had been together all day but they lingered, loath to separate. "Listen, Peggy," [232] Priscilla exclaimed. "Come home with me. Like enough mother will have an errand for me to do and then we can go together. Don't you love outdoors when it's still and cold like this?"

"Yes, love it. I'll go and see if we need anything in the way of groceries, and I'll join you in about a minute."

Peggy hurried up the walk and Priscilla went on her way. The evening paper lay folded on the porch of her home and she picked it up and tucked it under her arm before she slipped her key into the latch. She found the kitchen empty and ran upstairs, calling her mother. But only the echoes answered, and Priscilla realized that except for herself the house was empty.

Priscilla seated herself to wait for Peggy, picking up the paper she had thrown on the library table. Her eye ran mechanically over the columns. She turned the sheets, her thoughts still busy with the day's happenings, and with vague plans for the morrow. Then unexpectedly a familiar [233] face flashed out at her from the page, set above head-lines that seemed fairly to shriek their news.

Young Hitchcock Surprises Friends
Society Man Marries in New York

Priscilla, sitting motionless, read the news over several times. Then her eyes began moving down the column. Even when she saw Horace's name written out in full, her sense of unreality persisted. The reporter had treated the matter humorously, following the precedent which makes love and marriage the most popular theme for jests. That the lady in question had become Mrs. Hitchcock just three days after meeting her future husband furnished a partial excuse for the levity.

"Mr. Hitchcock denies that there is anything hasty in his romantic marriage," wrote the

reporter. "When asked if he considered a three days' acquaintance a sufficient prelude to matrimony, he smilingly replied that he preferred three thousand years. In explanation of his enigmatic remark, Mr. Hitchcock gave his views on reincarnation, while in the background Mrs. [234] Hitchcock blushed assent. Both are convinced that, to quote Mr. Hitchcock, 'they were soul mates when the pyramids were in building, lovers in Babylon—'"

Priscilla suddenly crumpled the paper in her hand. The familiar phrases were like a dash of cold water, rousing her from her daze. "I'm free," she cried, "I'm free! I'm free!" and broke into violent weeping.

Peggy rang several times without attracting attention. When at length she put her finger to the button and held it there, Priscilla woke to the realization that there was some one at the door. She crept downstairs, unconsciously holding fast to the paper that had announced her release, and admitted a justly incensed Peggy.

"I'm afraid you need some of those artificial ear-drums, Priscilla—Why, what's happened?" Peggy's attempted irony changed to affectionate concern, as she saw Priscilla with her tear-streaked cheeks and eyes inflamed and swollen. She threw her arms around her friend, her imagination running the gamut of possible calamities. "Oh, what is the matter?" she pleaded. [235]

It seemed to Priscilla that a verbal explanation was beyond her. Dumbly she held out the crumpled sheet. Peggy caught sight of Horace's smug smile, snatched the paper from Priscilla's hand, and read the incredible story at a glance. The blood rushed to her brain, dying even her ears crimson. Rage shook her. For the instant, the gentle Peggy was a silent fury.

Priscilla roused herself to the need of explanation. "Peggy!"

Peggy whirled upon her. "My dear, it is the most abominable thing I ever heard of, but you couldn't have cared for him, Priscilla. Oh, tell me you didn't."

"We—well, we were engaged."

"Engaged," choked Peggy. She took a backward step, looked at Priscilla's disfigured face, and dug her nails deep into her palms. "Oh, I wish I were a man," she breathed in a voice hardly recognizable.

Priscilla uttered a choked laugh. Combined with the fact that the tears were still running down [236] her face, this did not tend to allay Peggy's apprehensions. But as the laugh seemed to unlock Priscilla's tongue, her distressed friend was not long kept in suspense.

"I suppose I looked as if I were heart-broken," exclaimed Priscilla, laughing and crying. "Yes, we were really engaged, Peggy, but you can't imagine what a nightmare it has been."

"A nightmare," gasped Peggy. "Your engagement a nightmare!" She put her hands to her head as if the unexpected information acquired in the last few minutes had crowded it to the bursting point.

"Wait, Peggy! I've had a dreadful time, but it's been my own fault. I blame myself for everything that has happened. If it hadn't been for my silly vanity—"

"Vanity—" interrupted Peggy, and sniffed her scorn.

"Oh, you can sneer, Peggy Raymond, but I've been a silly little fool. In the first place, I made myself miserable because nobody wanted me."

"Priscilla," Peggy interrupted again, "I believe you ought to go to bed. You're talking as if you [237] were delirious."

"I know perfectly well what I'm saying, Peggy. You were engaged to Graham, and Nelson was in love with Ruth and Bob Carey was getting very attentive to Amy, and I was the only one left out and I resented it."

"Do you mean," cried Peggy incredulously, "that you don't know that you're so handsome that people are always turning to look after you when you pass?"

Priscilla laughed. "I won't choke you off, Peggy. After that news—" she nodded significantly toward the paper. "I fancy I can stand a little flattery and not be injured. But anyway I was sour and sore when Horace began to call. I knew exactly what Horace was, Peggy, but I shut my eyes to it. I wouldn't criticize him even in my thoughts. I wouldn't let you laugh at him—"

"Don't I know it!" Peggy drew a long breath. "That was one of the things that made me anxious."

"Well, when he told me—that he cared for me, I just snatched at him, Peggy. I was perfectly [238] delighted that somebody thought I was attractive. And I was such a silly little fool that I actually gloated over being the second girl out of us four to get engaged. Peggy, I'm terribly ashamed to tell you all this, but now's the time to finish up the subject and be done with it."

"Priscilla darling, I can understand everything except your feeling that way about yourself."

"Of course I wasn't happy," Priscilla went on. "I don't know whether Horace was or not. He always talked in a dreadfully pessimistic fashion, but I rather think—"

"Just a pose," interpolated Peggy witheringly. "Even when he was a little boy, Horace was always playing a part."

"Once or twice I tried to tell him I thought we had made a mistake. When I thought of going on and on through the years it didn't seem as if I could bear it. And then he talked so dreadfully, Peggy, and I was afraid he'd kill himself."

"No such luck," snorted Priscilla's audience. It was hard to believe that it was really Peggy [239] making such a speech and looking so fierce and angry. Priscilla interrupted her story by a little hysterical laugh.

"The last time was only two weeks ago at the foot-ball game. He was so disagreeable that I tried again to get out of it, and then he took it so to heart that I gave up all hope of ever being free. When I read that account today, and it came over me all at once that I needn't ever see Horace Hitchcock again, it seemed as if I'd die of joy. I believe I should have, too, if I hadn't begun to cry."

Peggy was still scornful. "The idea of your sacrificing yourself for such a fellow as Horace."

"Only because I was to blame, Peggy. As long as my silly vanity had got me into such a scrape, I thought nothing was too bad for me."

"Didn't it ever occur to you that two wrongs didn't make a right? If you were wrong in getting engaged to Horace when you didn't love him, marrying him without love would be a million times wickeder."

Priscilla took the reproof meekly. "Perhaps so. Anyway, I have learned my lesson. The wrong [240] man is so much worse than no man at all that now I'm perfectly resigned to being an old maid."

Peggy sniffed derisively. "You talk about your silly vanity. You certainly were silly enough, but when it comes to vanity, why, Priscilla Combs, you're the most painfully modest girl I know. The timid violet is a monster of arrogance compared to you. I adore Ruth and Amy, as everybody knows, but when it comes to looks, they're simply not in it alongside you. You're handsome, Priscilla, just as Horace's dreadful old aunt said, and you're talented and you're charming, and lots of men would fall in love with you in a minute if they thought they had the ghost of a chance."

Priscilla clapped her hands over her ears and blushed till Peggy's eloquence lost itself in laughter. "I'm not going to be punished by having to marry Horace," she said, when at length she judged it safe to lower her defenses. "But I shan't get off scott-free. Just think, Peggy, how many people in this city will be sorry for me, because I've been jilted by Horace Hitchcock."

CHAPTER XVII [241]

PEGGY COMES TO A DECISION

It was mid-afternoon on a crisp February day when Graham called Peggy on the phone. In his preliminary "Hello" she detected an unwonted note of excitement.

"Hello, Graham. Yes, it's Peggy."

"I want you to take dinner with me to-night."

"Take dinner? Why, I can't possibly, Graham. I've got quite a lot of cramming to do for the mid-year examinations. And I haven't even looked at my lessons for to-morrow."

"Hang your lessons."

Peggy pricked up her ears. "What did you say?" she queried incredulously.

"I said, 'Hang your lessons,' and I'll add, 'Hang your examinations.' I've got to see you and have a long talk."

One of the advantages of habitual faithfulness to duty is that the rare relapse into irresponsibility comes as a delightful holiday. Peggy's face suddenly crinkled into a charming [242] smile. It was a pity Graham could not see it.

"Oh, well," she said demurely, "if it's terribly important—"

"It is."

"Then I suppose I must let you have your way."

"I'll call for you at half past six and we'll dine at the McLaughlin."

"The McLaughlin! You haven't happened to come into a fortune since last evening, have you!"

"Not exactly. It's a celebration."

"What for?"

"That's telling. See you at six-thirty, Peggy darling. Good-by." And Graham rang off in a hurry,

as if he feared her powers of persuasion, and suspected that if he gave her half a chance she would have the whole story out of him over the wire.

Peggy went back to her books with a smile which proved her thinking of something very different from history or economics. She was well aware that she would go to the class next day [243] without her usual careful preparation, but having made up her mind to accede to Graham's request, she had no intention of spoiling her pleasure by thinking of slighted tasks. And though she made a valiant effort at concentration in the short time left her for study, her attempt was not particularly successful. The dinner was a celebration, Graham had said. She racked her brain to recall some anniversary that had momentarily escaped her recollection, but without results.

Peggy was dressed by six o'clock, having spent an unprecedentedly long time over her toilet. The McLaughlin, though not the largest hotel in the city, was one of the most exclusive, and the costumes seen in the dining-room were frequently of an elegance compared with which Peggy's little evening frock was almost dowdy. But neither at the McLaughlin nor elsewhere was one likely to see a face more charming than that which looked back at Peggy from her mirror, so that her haunting fear that Graham might be ashamed of her was entirely unfounded.

Mrs. Raymond left the dining table to see the young couple off. "Have a good time, dears," she [244] said, and was pleased but not surprised when Graham followed Peggy's example, and stooping kissed her. She stood at the window looking after them as they went down the street. What a dear boy Graham was! In the far-off, nebulous future when Peggy began to think of being married, she could trust her to Graham without a fear. And then they would live near, where she could see Peggy every day. Mrs. Raymond told herself she would not have anything different.

"Mother," called Mr. Raymond's voice from the dining-room, "your dinner's getting cold."

Meanwhile Peggy, tilting her head on one side like an inquisitive canary, was asking Graham, "What is it we are going to celebrate?"

"Washington's birthday and the Fourth of July, Christmas and New Year's."

"Now, Graham, really I want to know."

"I'll tell you when the time comes. It's not the sort of thing to be sprung on the street."

"Oh, how interesting!" But though Peggy stopped asking questions, her curiosity grew [245] prodigiously. Silent as Graham was as to the occasion of this unwonted festivity, she realized that there was about him an atmosphere of suppressed excitement. Sometimes, when his eyes were on her, he seemed to be looking through her at something big in the distance. Peggy was at the age when thrills and mysteries are always welcome. She climbed aboard the street-car all a-tingle with pleasurable excitement.

The dining-room at the McLaughlin impressed Peggy with its grandeur. The hour was still early for fashionable diners, and less than half of the tables were occupied. But the rows of waiters in black clothes and gleaming shirt fronts, and the scrape of violins in the background, gave Peggy an uneasy sense of being out of place. But Graham, convinced that he was escorting the queen rose of the rose-bud garden of girls, walked to his place as sure of himself as a young prince. And what he saw in Peggy's eyes was not of a sort to lessen his self-confidence.

Peggy soon perceived that her customary little hints regarding economy were to have no [246] weight on this particular occasion. Graham began with oysters and then appealed to Peggy as to her choice in soups. And perceiving that he was determined to be extravagant, for all she could say or do, Peggy gave herself up to enjoying the fruits of his extravagance. This was clearly Graham's night. Peggy decided not to ask again about his secret till he told her of his own accord.

As a matter of fact, Graham seemed in no hurry to take her into his confidence. The meal went on through its leisurely courses, the tables about them gradually filling, till the attentive waiter set their dessert before them—French pastries with small cups of deliciously fragrant coffee. Peggy tasted and sipped and smiled, and looked across the table with such an air of radiant happiness that if Graham had kept the smallest fragment of a heart in his possession, he would have been forced to surrender it on the spot.

He laid down his fork and leaned toward her. "Peggy, I've got my promotion."

"Oh, Graham!"

"They want me to go to South America for two years," Graham continued, speaking with [247] curious breathlessness. "They're not asking me to stay permanently, you understand. But they want a man here who's thoroughly familiar with conditions down there."

Peggy looked at him without replying, all the radiant happiness drained from her face. South America! Her sensations were almost the same as when he went to France, except that now she had no patriotic ardor to sustain her. He was to be away two years, and yet his mood was exultant, and he seemed to expect her congratulations.

Peggy rallied her courage and lifted her eyes with a wan little smile. "When—when do they want you to go?" Her fork clattered against her plate, and she laid it down. She conceived on the instant an intense loathing for French pastry.

"In July."

"PEGGY LOOKED AT HIM WITHOUT REPLYING"

"Oh!" Peggy winked hard. It would be a shame to spoil that beautiful dinner by crying. And besides, it was a long time before Graham would have to go, from February to July. Then a dreadful thought wrung her heart. If six months was a long time, what of two years? [248]

Graham's face seemed to waver as he leaned toward her across the little round table. His voice sounded far-off and unfamiliar. "What do you say, Peggy? Shall we go?"

"I—I—what are you talking about Graham?"

"You're always saying how you'd love to travel. Don't you see this is your chance."

"Do you—do you mean—"

"Yes, of course I do. Won't you marry me, Peggy, and go along? I can't leave you for two years. I can't. When I came back from the other side I promised myself I'd never be separated from you again by anything less than a world war. If I went by myself, Peggy, it would be going into exile for two years. But with you along, it would be a two-years' honeymoon. Think what it would be to see those new countries together."

"I suppose it would be a good thing for our Spanish," said Peggy, and the inane remark set them both to laughing, which undoubtedly was a good thing. When the paroxysm was over, Peggy wiped her eyes and struggled to be reasonable. "But, Graham, I don't [249] graduate till the twelfth of June."

"And I don't sail till the sixth of July. Loads of time."

"But I always meant to earn my living for a few years after I graduated, before—"

"I wouldn't have stood for that, Peggy, not if I was making enough to take care of you, and I shall be."

Peggy was breathing fast. It was hard to realize that she and Graham were sitting there in the McLaughlin dining-room, discussing the question of whether or not they should be married in July. For except on one memorable occasion, when Graham had been on the point of going across and Peggy had been ready to marry him at a moment's notice, she had felt about her marriage much as her mother did, as if it belonged to the misty, distant, indeterminate future. And now the six months she had assured herself was a long time had dwindled down almost to nothing. July! It was incredibly, overwhelmingly near.

"We'll have to see what father and mother think." She tried to make her voice matter-of-fact, [250] but it had an unnatural tension. Graham on the other side of the little table, nodded agreement.

"Of course we'll see what they think. But we know they can say only one thing. It's such a reasonable solution that only one opinion is possible. Don't you like your dessert, Peggy? Won't you have some ice-cream?"

Peggy protested she liked her desert, and finished it without tasting a morsel. Then they went home and proceeded to bomb the peaceful Raymond household with Graham's astounding proposition. And while Mrs. Raymond began by pronouncing it out of the question, before the evening ended she was driven to admit the reasonableness of Graham's plan. It was true that Peggy's marriage would follow rather closely on the heels of her graduation, but thanks to common-sense hours of sleep, and an abundance of outdoor exercise, she had come through her four years' college course in radiant health. A separation of two years just now would be hard for both, and especially for Graham. Indeed Graham frankly declared that he would not go without Peggy, and yet to refuse such a chance was to prejudice his future success. [251]

When Peggy went to bed that night she knew the whole thing was settled. To be sure, both her father and mother had warned her against a hasty decision, insisting that she take plenty of time to think the matter over. But Peggy knew what the final verdict would be, and she was sure Graham also knew it, by the triumph in his eyes as he kissed her good night.

Changes! She lay in her little white bed and thought of the new life opening before her, strange countries, unfamiliar tongues, alien customs, even the dear, friendly constellations replaced by unknown stars. And the queerest part of all was that she herself would no longer be Peggy Raymond, but a strange young woman, Margaret Wylie by name. Peggy gave a little incredulous laugh. It was astonishing how the world had turned upside down since morning.

CHAPTER XVIII
A PARTIAL ECLIPSE

THE wedding day was set for the second of July, and after that decision had been reached, Peggy professed a complete loss of interest in the subject. When Graham consulted her on details more or less important, she gave him a reluctant attention.

"I tell you, Graham, I don't want to think about it. I never did enjoy mixed flavors. I shall have years and years of being Mrs. Graham Wylie, fifty or sixty probably, and there's only a few months left of my college life."

"If you feel so keenly on the subject," teased Graham, "we'd better postpone our wedding, and let you take a post-graduate course of ten years or so."

"That won't be necessary. I know I shall love my wedding clothes, and my wedding day, and being married to you, and everything. But if I let myself think of that, I'll spoil this, don't you see? [253] It would be like eating ice-cream with soup."

"I suppose I shall be allowed to call occasionally."

"Don't be silly! Of course I should be wretched if I didn't see you every day. But unless you have to settle something very important about South America, don't ask my opinion. Up to the twelfth of June, I'm a college senior, first, last and all the time."

Peggy was as good as her word. As far as her conversation revealed, she never looked beyond Commencement Day. And if it was inevitable that her thoughts should be more unruly than her tongue, her mental excursions into the future were surprisingly few. Peggy had never been a girl to discount to-day in favor of to-morrow, and this life-long habit aided her in her determination to extract the full flavor from the present.

While Peggy had thoroughly enjoyed her college life, college associations had naturally never meant to her what they mean to a girl who leaves home to complete her education. Although she [254] was popular in her class, her closest friends were the girls who had been her intimates long before her high-school days, even, and she enjoyed her home so thoroughly that it never occurred to her to regret having missed the associations of dormitory life. But now she gave herself so unreservedly to her college interests that no on-looker would have dreamed that any event of special importance had been scheduled for early July.

As a matter of fact, Peggy could hardly have done justice to her varied duties in connection with Commencement, had she brought to them a divided attention. Her knack at rhyming had resulted in her election as class poet, and the same gift, doubtless, had caused her to be chosen one of the editorial staff of the Annual, gotten out each spring by the senior class. Moreover she had a part, though a small one, in the class play that was to be given out-of-doors and promised to be one of the most interesting features of commencement week. Since even for seniors there were lessons to be learned, and examinations to be passed, it is no wonder that Peggy found herself quite occupied without giving thought to the great changes on ahead. [255]

While she struggled with her poem, which she was determined as all class laureates, to make a masterpiece, and scribbled off jokes for the Annual and practised for the play, and studied in her odd minutes, the days had a most disconcerting fashion of shooting by without regard to speed regulations. Every Saturday night awoke in Peggy's mind the same incredulity. Another week was gone—only it couldn't be, for it was no time at all since last Sunday morning. She had an unreasonable impulse to clutch at the flying hours and hold them fast.

But the last spring of her college life was not to be altogether a season of flowers. One afternoon at the close of recitations, Peggy hunted up Ruth who had agreed to go with her for a call on Mary Donaldson.

"Ruth, I'm sorry, but Priscilla and I are going to be busy until after dinner time, probably. It's the Annual again."

"That old Annual takes so much time," scolded Ruth, objecting on principle to anything that [256] separated her from Peggy for these few precious weeks. Poor Ruth was trying to imitate Peggy's example and not look ahead, but there were times when the coming desolation settled over her spirits like a chilling fog. With Peggy and Graham in South America, and Nelson in Oklahoma, Ruth felt that existence would be flat and flavorless.

"Yes, I know it takes time." Peggy resolutely ignored the undertone of tragedy in Ruth's voice. "But somebody has to do it, and anyway, it's fun."

It was due to her lingering to cheer the despondent Ruth that Peggy was the last of the Annual staff to reach the class room, which for that particular evening had been promoted to the dignity of an editorial sanctum. Peggy made her entry on a somewhat hilarious scene. Everybody was laughing, or so Peggy thought. Had she been more observant she would have noticed that Priscilla's face wore no smile, but a look of anxiety, bordering on distress.

"What's the joke?" inquired Peggy, as she took her seat. Though the gathering was made up of college seniors and was therefore a dignified, deliberative assembly, its proceedings were [257] sometimes as informal as if they had been merely a group of high-school girls.

By way of answer, a sheet of card-board that evidently had made the rounds was put in her hand. Peggy looked at it curiously. At the top, under the heading, "The Misfit," was a clever caricature representing a small man attired in garments much too large for him. His broad-brimmed hat came down over his ears, his overcoat trailed on the ground, while the umbrella he carried was more than double his height. But the artist had avoided giving the impression that he was a masquerading child by bringing into prominence a somewhat scraggly mustache.

Peggy smiled appreciatively at the undoubted humor of the drawing and gave her attention to the verses below. But though they showed quite as much ability as the illustration, the effect of reading them was to erase the smile from her lips, leaving her gravely attentive. The laughter had quieted. She was aware that the girls were all watching her, and though she did not raise her eyes, she knew instinctively that Priscilla's face wore a look of apprehension. [258]

The previous spring, one of the most popular men in the English department had resigned to devote himself to literary work, and his place had been nominally filled by a young man with good credentials but no experience. He had proved a great disappointment, for whatever his attainments, he lacked the ability to impart; while in contrast to the enthusiasm which Professor Baer's lectures had aroused, his classes seemed veritable refrigerating plants. Peggy knew that the seniors who had taken his courses were complaining bitterly that they had been "stung," and had congratulated herself that her own work in English had been continued with another member of the faculty.

In the verses before her, all the resentment of the students toward an incompetent teacher, following an able and popular one, was expressed with diabolical cleverness. The fact that the present incumbent was named Fox, and that he followed Professor Baer, had already been the theme of innumerable jokes, and the author of the verses had used it as the motive of her lines, [259] so that there was no chance that even the outsider would remain ignorant of the instructor satirized.

Peggy read the verses over more than once in order to gain time. She was sorely tempted to say nothing. Peggy was under no illusions regarding the path of the reformer. It was vastly easier, vastly pleasanter, to let things go. It was not that she had any cowardly shrinking from hard knocks, but now, almost at the close of her college life, she was not in the mood to antagonize any one. She loved everything about the college, its gray stone buildings draped in ivy, its campus dotted with stately trees, the class-rooms and the laboratories, the dignified president, the professors and the girls—oh, most of all, the girls. She loved to believe in their affection, their admiration. Never in her life had popularity meant as much to her as now. And yet in spite of her distaste, she knew she had no choice. She must disagree, antagonize, anger.

When she lifted her eyes, the room was very quiet, almost as if every one knew what she was going to say. "Awfully clever, aren't they?" Peggy spoke very deliberately. "What are they for?" [260]

A dark-eyed girl across the room took it on herself to answer, and as soon as her lips parted, Peggy knew her for the author.

"I'd intended it for the *Atlantic Monthly*," she smiled with frank sarcasm. "But I think perhaps it's better suited to the Annual. What do you say?"

"I'm afraid I don't think it's at all suited to the Annual."

There was a little chorus of protests. "You never were in his classes, Peggy," cried some one from the rear seat. "If you'd endured what we have at the hands of that man, you'd love every line."

A burst of approving laughter showed how completely the sympathies of this group of girls were with the speaker. Half-whispered comments were being exchanged. "The stupidest lectures!" "The greatest waste of time!" Peggy was perfectly able to understand this point of view. She struggled to make the girls see hers.

"Of course that's not right. If I had been in his class I'd have been perfectly ready to go to [261] President Eaton, and tell him how unsatisfactory everything was. But to take this way of doing it —" she looked down at the mocking lines and said with a visible effort, "Don't you think it seems a little bit cowardly—and cruel, too?"

Priscilla came to her friend's assistance. "If the faculty knew about those verses, I'm sure we'd never be allowed to put them in the Annual."

"How's the faculty to know?" demanded the criticized author, Ida Craig, with much asperity.

"Don't you think," suggested Peggy with all the diplomacy she could muster, "that since they leave it all to us, we're put on our honor to see that nothing gets in that they could object to?"

Ida smiled disagreeably. "After all," she said, "you're not the editor-in-chief, you know."

The rudeness gave Peggy the courage that she needed. "No, of course. I haven't any more voice than any of the rest of you. But if the poem goes in, I shall ask you to accept my resignation."

"In other words," exclaimed Ida, "If you can't have your own way, you'll take your dolls and go [262] home."

"No indeed," Peggy was trying to speak calmly, but her voice shook, "But if my name appears among the editors of the Annual, it'll be taken for granted that I approve of all that is in it. I'm not willing to stand for anything like this."

"Nor I," said Priscilla. "I agree with Peggy."

Ida Craig leaned toward the girl nearest her. "Miss Combs is nothing if not original," she said in an echoing stage-whisper audible to every one in the room. But the editor-in-chief, dismayed at the prospect of losing two of her most reliable aides, hastily interposed.

"Now we mustn't get personal, girls," she said. "You know how the newspapers are always trying to make out that the members of women's organizations do nothing but quarrel. I think college graduates ought to disprove that sort of thing." She looked at Peggy rather appealingly. "I suppose you're willing to abide by the will of the majority," she said.

"If the majority vote to include 'The Misfit,'" returned Peggy, "Of course that settles it." And [263]
then as the face of the editor-in-chief brightened, she added, "But I shall have to resign, because the vote of the majority can't decide a question of right and wrong for me."

"Oh," said the editor-in-chief rather blankly, and then she quickly rallied. "We'll decide that question when we come to it," she said. "Will the meeting please come to order."

The mooted question was not put to vote till the end of the hour. "All in favor of including 'The Misfit' in the Annual," said the editor-in-chief, after the motion had been duly made, "please signify it by saying 'aye.'"

"Aye," chimed two defiant voices, that of the author and her dearest friend in the class.

"Those opposed, 'No.'"

There was a murmur of 'noes,' indicating that Peggy had won her fight, but she had none of the elation of the victor. She realized that several had not voted, and that those who had espoused her side had acted from motives of policy rather than conviction. Ida Craig was plainly offended, [264]
and as for the rest, Peggy suspected that they failed to make the fine distinction between standing up for one's principles and being determined to have one's way.

Those closing weeks of college life were not all she had hoped. Peggy fancied a reserve in the friendliness of her friends. She became unnaturally sensitive, imagining slights where none existed. She was troubled by the thought that Priscilla shared in her partial eclipse of popularity, and inclined to regard her uncompromising conscience as a decided inconvenience, if nothing worse.

But Peggy's stand was to have a tragic justification. Three weeks before Commencement the Annual came from the binders, looking very attractive in its cover of blue and white, the college colors. The editorial force had been called together to make the necessary arrangements for placing it on sale. Peggy and Priscilla had an early class Wednesday morning, and as they entered the hall on their way to the cloak-room, they encountered Phyllis Riordan, the Annual's editor-in-chief. Phyllis' greeting was more than cordial, but Peggy hardly noticed that, in her [265]
concern for the girl herself.

"Why, Phyllis," she cried. "What's the matter? You're as white as a sheet."

Phyllis looked from one to the other. "You haven't heard about Mrs. Fox?"

"What about her?" The question came simultaneously from two pairs of lips.

"She died last night."

Peggy and Priscilla uttered a shocked exclamation. They were both but slightly acquainted with the girlish wife of the unpopular professor of English, but intimacy was not needed to point the tragedy of the news. Her voice curiously tense, Phyllis continued.

"It seemed she had serious heart trouble, and the doctor thought she ought to live in a milder climate. Professor Fox has resigned, and they were to locate in southern California. And Oh, Peggy Raymond—"

She turned suddenly toward Peggy, and caught both of her hands. "Since I heard the news last evening, I haven't been able to think of anything else. Peggy, do you realize what it would have [266]
meant if we had let that poem of Ida's go in? We'd have had to destroy the whole edition of the Annual. We couldn't have done anything else."

Peggy changed color slightly, but did not speak.

"You've saved our lives," declared Phyllis, her eyes bright with tears. "If it hadn't been for you, we'd have been in the worst box of any class since the college was founded. And when I think how brave you were, standing out against us all—"

"Why, Phyllis," Peggy interposed, "I wasn't brave at all. This—this dreadful thing that has happened doesn't make me a bit more right than I was in the beginning. And I knew it, too, and yet I wasn't satisfied. I've been ready to wish I hadn't done it a hundred times. And when you call me brave, you make me desperately ashamed, for nobody knows as well as I do what a coward I've been."

"If you're cowardly, Peggy," cried Priscilla, up in arms at once, "I'm sorry for the rest of us."

"Heavens, I should say so," agreed Phyllis. And then as the signal bell sounded, the girls [267] rushed for the cloak room. Blended with Peggy's sorrow and her sense of humility, was a gratifying certainty that the last three weeks of her college life would be all she had dreamed.

CHAPTER XIX [268]
THE END OF SCHOOL LIFE

The senior banquet was the most intimate and, in the opinion of many, the most delightful festivity of Commencement. No guests were invited. The only member of the faculty present was the honorary member of the class, a charming woman, who taught Greek and talked slang—as an antidote, she was wont to say. And because it was so strictly a class affair, a great deal of fun was in order which would have been impossible before ever so limited an audience.

"What I like about it is that it's frankly selfish," Peggy told Priscilla. And then noticing Priscilla's expression of incredulity, "I don't mean selfish in the mean sense, just the nice, comfortable, homey sort. All the rest of Commencement we're thinking about other people, the Board of Trustees, and the fathers and mothers, and the audience and the public. It's a comfort [269] that there's one thing where we don't have to think of any one but ourselves, and we can be as silly as we please."

The first class to graduate had established a precedent which every succeeding class had strictly followed, that all engagements were to be announced at the class banquet, Commencement week. If for any reason it was preferred that such announcements should be regarded as confidential, it was understood that the members of the class would be put to torture rather than reveal a word. So strictly had a few such items of news been guarded—in some instances for several years—that the ability of a woman to keep a secret had apparently been satisfactorily demonstrated by the graduates of Peggy's alma mater. As a rule, however, the graduate who announced her engagement at the class banquet was willing that all the world should know the joyful news.

The banquet was held in the college gymnasium, the long tables being arranged in a hollow square. After the feasting was over, the waiters were dismissed and the doors closed to ensure perfect secrecy,—after which every girl engaged in the class was expected to take her stand in [270] the central enclosure, carrying with her a photograph of her fiancé, the back of the said photograph being duly inscribed with her name and his. And as if this were not enough, each was required to state in a few well-chosen words the qualities which differentiated her particular young man from all the rest of mankind. At the conclusion of this unique ceremony, the photographs were passed about and duly inspected, and then a vote was taken to determine the handsomest. The gentleman so honored was presented with a stick-pin, which his betrothed took charge of until such time as she chose to deliver it.

As the girls dispatched their deviled crabs and chicken salad and ice cream, and other incongruous and indigestible dainties, the thoughts of many turned expectantly toward the ceremony immediately following the banquet. It was true that some of the engagements were no secret. Graham Wylie, for instance, had been Peggy Raymond's devoted cavalier ever since she graduated from high school. And there were girls in the dormitories who heard so frequently and [271] at such length from certain men friends that they were assumed to be engaged whether they admitted it or not. But on the other hand there were always surprises enough to render the occasion exciting.

The ice cream was dispatched at last, along with the cakes and candies. The little coffee cups were emptied. The waiters cleared the tables and withdrew, closing the door according to instructions. And then from here and there in the long rows of diners, one laughing girl after another rose, and made her way into the vacant space enclosed by the tables.

Priscilla's eye followed Peggy on her way, blushing, laughing, and looking to Priscilla's fond eyes the embodiment of girlish loveliness. And then some one called her name. "Why, Priscilla Combs!"

Priscilla turned. A classmate that she knew only slightly was leaning across the table. "Why aren't you going with the others?" she cried.

"I?" Priscilla colored to the roots of her hair. "I'm not eligible."

"Oh, come!" retorted the other archly. "This isn't any time for prevarication, you know. You're [272] expected to tell the truth."

Some one caught the speaker by the arm, and as she turned, hissed a terse statement in her ear. Only too well did Priscilla know the import of that whisper. Inaudible as it was, its news might as well have been shouted. The girl who had innocently assumed Priscilla's engagement was now hearing that Horace Hitchcock, after paying Priscilla every attention, had met some one he liked better in New York, and had married her after three days' acquaintance.

Priscilla held her head high. She saw her *vis-à-vis* change color and lift startled eyes. When she found Priscilla regarding her, the girl lost her head. "Oh, excuse me," she gasped.

"Why certainly," laughed Priscilla. "I'm like the man who was asked to change a twenty-dollar bill. I appreciate the compliment." But for all her cheerful air, the thing rankled. Would they never be done pitying her because she had been jilted by Horace Hitchcock. It was impossible to [273] explain, but it really seemed to Priscilla that some of them might suspect what a relief the termination of that unacknowledged engagement had been.

There were now a dozen girls in the enclosure. The appearance of some was greeted with loud cries, intended to convey reproach, or incredulity. Excited comments ran around the tables. "Look, there's Cynthia, after insisting that there wasn't a thing between them." "Why, there's Anne Gordon." "Now who in the world—" And while the eager inspection went on, the twelve girls in the middle stood rather close together as if each found it a help in that trying moment to feel she was not alone.

The talk and laughter quieted when the president rapped for order. Eloise Hayden was the first to be called on to introduce her fiancé to her attentive classmates. Eloise was one of the girls who affect the modern pose of matter-of-factness. She was so afraid of undue sentimentality that she went too far in the other direction, like one who is so determined to be straight as to bend backward. As Eloise's name was spoken, she stepped out from the group, and held up to view the [274] photograph she carried.

"Friends and classmates, I am introducing John Mackenzie Rowe. As you see, he is no beauty, and he'll never wear the stick pin unless it's given for a consolation prize. But on the other hand, he isn't bad looking enough so he needs to wear a mask when he goes on the street."

The momentary silence as Eloise stopped for breath was filled by a chorus of groans, Eloise's classmates disapproving her extreme lack of sentiment. Quite unabashed by this demonstration, Eloise continued.

"John and I live in the country, as some of you know. The only thing between his father's place and my father's place is a privet hedge, not high enough to be a barrier. We've lived on the two sides of that hedge since he was thirteen and I eleven. I suppose if any other boy had lived there, I should now be engaged to him. And if any other girl had lived where I do, he would have been engaged to her."

The signs of displeasure redoubled. Mingled with the groans were hisses, and Eloise, who liked [275] nothing better than to stir her friends to protest against her nonchalant attitude, continued blithely:

"Our engagement is in every way a sensible one. Neither of us thinks the other perfect, so we won't have the usual disillusionment and disappointment after we are married. I'm sorry I shan't be able to introduce John to you to-morrow, but he wrote me that if he came he would have to put off a business trip, and I wrote him, 'Business first.'"

The demonstrations of disapproval were now so marked that Eloise considered this a good place to stop. She laid down the photograph for the girls' inspection and stepped back, seemingly very well satisfied with her performance.

Judith West, a plump pink and white girl, looking, thanks to her bobbed hair and round face, not a day over fifteen, was next to be called on. Judith blushed rosily as she held up the photograph of a handsome young man in a lieutenant's uniform.

"This is Philip Carpenter," she announced in a faint, frightened voice. "And all I can say is that [276] he's as good as he looks."

"He looks good enough to eat," encouraged an admiring voice from a side-table.

"He is," declared Judith. "At least—well, you know what I mean. He's just as nice as he can be, and after I'd seen him once, nobody else in the world had the least chance."

As this impressed the class as the proper attitude for an engaged girl, the applause was hearty, and the blushing Judith interpreted it as a *finish* to her remarks, and retreated in charming confusion. But the applause dropped into instantaneous silence as Anne Gordon arose. Anne's appearance in the enclosure had surprised every one.

"I haven't much of a photograph to show you," said Anne holding up a kodak picture in which three diminutive figures appeared seated under an apple tree. "The one in the middle is Elmer Wharton. He looks very tiny, but believe me, he's longer than our engagement."

Anne stopped to laugh, and the class laughed with her.

"I had a letter from Elmer yesterday," Anne continued, "a very particular letter. I can't say it [277] was a great surprise to me, though you all seem so astonished. And in this letter Elmer told me a number of things he meant to say to me as soon as I got home. But I thought of to-night, and I couldn't see why I shouldn't be engaged the day before Commencement as well as the day after. So I telegraphed him, *yes*."

Amid the shrieks of laughter due to this frank acknowledgment, Peggy was called, and she held up her photograph with an engaging pride.

"I fancy there aren't many of you who need to be introduced to Graham Wylie, for he's been very much in evidence ever since I entered college. I don't know any way of doing justice to the subject, but when I feel strongly about anything, I'm very likely to drop into poetry, like Mr. Wegg."

Peggy, who had been brought up on Dickens as if she had been a girl of the fifties, had forgotten how few of her contemporaries had ever heard of Mr. Wegg. Warned of her slip by the [278] blank faces that looked back at her, she began to recite the lines she had written in sheer desperation the previous evening, after she was supposed to be in bed.

"It isn't because he's six feet two
With shoulders to match his height,
That I'm happy and proud to be facing you
On this very eventful night.

"It isn't because his face is fine,
Clear-cut, like a cameo,
That I value the right to call him mine
More than any one here can know.

"It isn't because he's so very wise;
We both could improve right there.
His faults are plain to the kindest eyes,
And I know that I have my share.

"He's not perfection—to hint at this
Would waken his scornful mirth.
And yet he has made me—just as he is—
The happiest girl on earth.

"I know he is built of the sterling stuff
Of which manly men are made. [279]
And that glad certainty is enough
To render me unafraid.

"As we scatter to go our devious ways
Like sparks from the anvil hurled,
I want you to think of me all your days,
As the proudest girl in the world."

The applause that greeted Peggy's effort was not due chiefly to the quality of her verses, nor even to the charm of her undisguised happiness. The Editorial Staff of the Annual had leaked out. It had been whispered about that if it had not been for Peggy's protests, the Annual would have contained a satirical attack on a stricken man, which would have rendered its circulation impossible. The clapping died down, and then broke out again, as if to emphasize the fact that it was a personal tribute.

And so one after another, the girls in the enclosure introduced the possessors of the names they themselves would some day bear, and having finished, went laughing back to their seats. The photographs were passed about for examination and the ballots distributed. The voting was a [280] somewhat protracted process due, doubtless, to the fact that so much was at stake. But in course of time the ballots were collected and the judges retired to count them, the girls filling in the interval with college songs.

The announcement of the result of the balloting came as a great surprise to Peggy. For the recipient of the stick pin was not Graham but Philip Carpenter. Judith, blushing very prettily, made the speech of acceptance in behalf of her fiancé, and took the pin.

"I wish to say to you all," said the class president, "that twenty-five dollars is deposited with the treasurer for the purchase of a wedding-present for the first of our number to marry. I can only say it can't be spent too soon to suit me. It's time," she added severely, "that somebody was disproving the slander that college women care only for civic reform and settlement work and teaching school, and that home and husbands don't matter to them at all."

Priscilla glanced discreetly in Peggy's direction, but Peggy was looking at the table. Indeed her [281] expression remained thoughtful till the first toast was given, and she stood with the others to drink to her alma mater in a draught of fruit punch.

It was not till they were on their way home that Priscilla discovered the reason for Peggy's temporary abstraction. For while they were talking of something entirely different, Peggy suddenly exclaimed, "Do you suppose it was the uniform that dazzled them?"

"I don't quite understand you, Peggy."

"Why, that vote, you know. Of course Judith's lieutenant is a very good looking fellow, but the idea of comparing him to Graham."

Priscilla looked at her friend askance and said nothing.

"I have a photograph of Graham in uniform," Peggy continued, "and now I wish I'd brought that. But I hadn't any idea it would count so much."

"Peggy," began Priscilla faintly. "Will you promise not to be angry if I tell you something?"

"Of course. Why should I be angry?" [282]

"Well, then, I voted for Philip Carpenter."

Peggy looked at her in seemingly speechless amazement. "But why?" she asked at last.

"Because—well, there could be only one reason for that, Peggy, because I thought him the handsomest man in the collection. His nose is wonderful."

"And so is Graham's. I never saw a more perfect nose."

"Philip's eyes are so big and beautiful."

"A little *too* big, it seems to me. It gives him a rather girly look. Now Graham's eyes are just large enough."

Priscilla burst into an irrepressible shriek of laughter. "I wonder if it ever occurred to you, Peggy, that you might be a little bit prejudiced."

It was plain that such an idea had never occurred to Peggy. She looked blank for a moment and then joined in Priscilla's helpless laughter. "I suppose," she owned when again she could find her voice, "that it's just as well that tastes differ."

They parted at Priscilla's door, kissing each other good-night, a somewhat unusual ceremony, [283] far they were not girls who made a parade of affection. Peggy, who had started toward her own home, suddenly turned back as if she had forgotten something. Priscilla hurried down the steps to meet her.

"Priscilla, do you realize that to-morrow is Commencement Day? What a little time it seems since we entered as Freshman. Don't you remember how scared we were, and how in awe of the Seniors? And now, Priscilla our school life is over."

And much to Priscilla's astonishment, and even more to her own, Peggy burst into tears.

CHAPTER XX [284]
A SURPRISE

RATHER to the surprise of those who knew her best, Peggy had decided on a church wedding. But when she came to give her reasons, the decision seemed characteristic, after all.

"I think this is the dearest house in the world. When Graham and I come back from South America, I hope we can find one just like it—and on Friendly Terrace, too. But it's not what you'd call spacious. A dozen extra people crowd it, and it makes you uncomfortable to have a wedding and leave out so many."

"Our wedding seems likely to be a unique affair," grinned Graham. "From the looks of Peggy's list, the guests will make up in variety what they lack in exclusiveness. What do you think of her asking the Bonds?"

"Now, Graham, that's not fair. I haven't any idea of asking the Bond family. I only said that [285] Elvira had improved so much that I felt like encouraging her by sending her an invitation."

"And the Dunns. She's got them down." For all matrimonial responsibilities loomed so close, Graham's boyish fondness for teasing remained one of his most prominent characteristics.

"Why, Graham Wylie! Not the Dunns at all. Just Jimmy! And he's doing so well and looks as nice as any boy."

"And she says she's going to have her Sunday school class, one and all."

"Well, I should think so. I've taught those girls ever since they came out of the infant room, and they're darlings. And it would break their hearts if I were married and they weren't there to see."

Now that her college life was over, Peggy had thrown herself joyously into her planning for the next thing. Ruth, as Graham's sister, was to be the maid of honor, Priscilla and Amy bridesmaids. They decided on their gowns after hours and hours of delicious deliberation. For a July wedding, [286] organdie was the thing—the sheerest pale pink organdie, with pink roses to match on their wide hats. "You'll be dreams," Peggy declared ecstatically. "Everybody'll say so."

"Nonsense!" scoffed Amy, "As if people at a wedding ever looked at anybody but the bride!"

"I had a letter from Alice, yesterday," exclaimed Peggy, changing the subject. "She thinks little Irma had better be the flower-girl instead of Dorothy. She says Dorothy has been shooting up so fast lately, that now she's lanky and self-conscious, and that Irma is plump and adorable. I only

hope dear little Dorothy won't feel left out. That would spoil everything."

Robert Carey was to be Graham's best man, a decision which pleased Peggy immensely. Most of the ushers were young men the girls knew more or less, though Graham had included in the number a comparative new-comer at the office, Kennedy by name, with whom he was on especially friendly terms. "You ought to bring him out some evening," suggested Peggy, "and not [287] wait till just before the wedding to introduce him."

"No, that's right. I'll ask him to-morrow to set a time."

When Graham appeared shortly after dinner the following evening, Peggy and Priscilla were addressing invitations. Graham seated himself lazily in the arm chair and congratulated them on their industry. "Have you addressed all that pile to-day?"

"Yes, sir. We've been working ever since I got back from the dressmaker's, about four o'clock. Priscilla stayed to dinner so as not to lose any time."

There was a brief silence. Two pairs of pens scratched busily while Graham entertained himself by watching the anxious pucker of Peggy's mouth as she wrote each new address. "By the way," he remarked, "He's coming out to-night."

"Who is?"

"Kennedy."

The scratching of the pens came to an abrupt stop. "Priscilla," Peggy cried in tones of horror, "Graham has asked that Mr. Kennedy to call and he's coming this evening." [288]

"You told me to ask him," Graham defended himself.

"Of course, I want him to come. But I don't want him to descend on me without warning, and get the impression that you are going to marry a frump."

"Why, I was just thinking how nice you looked—both of you," Graham declared, kindly including Priscilla, who scorned to acknowledge the compliment. She rose, returned her pen to the writing desk, and said briefly, "I'm off."

"Put on your glad rags and come back, Priscilla," begged Peggy, who also was making preparations for a retreat.

"Oh, I think not. Mr. Kennedy isn't coming to see me."

"It'll be ever so much nicer if he meets some of you before the last minute. Ruth says she's got to put in this evening letter writing, and Amy and Bob are going somewhere."

"Oh, very well. I'll be back after a little." Priscilla spoke nonchalantly, but as a matter of fact, she was glad of Peggy's insistence. Now that the time was growing so short, she grudged every [289] hour she was away from her friend. As she left by the door, Peggy ran up the stairs, leaving Graham to the companionship of his own agreeable anticipations.

Peggy was back in about twenty minutes, looking, in Graham's estimation, very much the same, except that her dress was a lighter blue than the other, and her hair, having been freshly combed, did not show as much of the curl. He expressed his opinion and Peggy smiled tolerantly.

"I wore that old thing because a drop of ink more or less wouldn't matter. It's as old as the hills, and I made it when I didn't know as much about dress-making as I do now. Of course I like to have you think I look nice, no matter what I wear, but now you're going to be married, you'd better learn more discrimination in regard to clothes. It would be dreadful to have a new dress and you not able to see that it was any prettier than the old one."

"Very well. Suppose you start on my education right away. Tell me the fine points about the rig you've got on." But before Peggy could begin, the bell rang, and Graham's education was left [290] incomplete for the time being.

Mr. Kennedy was a slender, pleasant-mannered young man, who looked considerably older than Graham, partly perhaps, because he wore eye-glasses. As Peggy greeted him, she was conscious of something hauntingly familiar in his face. "I haven't met you before, have I?" she asked.

"It hardly seems that I could have met you and not remember it," said young Kennedy gallantly. "I'm very sure I've seen you before, however."

"And I believe I've seen you, but I don't know where."

"Hitchcock would say," remarked Graham, "that probably you had been well acquainted in Nineveh or Babylon or some other ancient burg."

Mr. Kennedy smiled, and took the chair Graham had pulled forward for him. "Who's Hitchcock?" he asked.

"Oh, a nut that Peggy used to have here till I told her she'd have to choose between us."

"Graham, what a misleading thing to say." [291]

"Well, it might give the wrong impression, I confess. Peggy didn't care much about him herself, but one of her friends had a case on him."

"Sh!" warned Peggy, in an agony as she heard Priscilla's footsteps outside. She filled the somewhat awkward pause by springing to her feet, crying as she ran to the door, "You needn't ring; I hear you."

The results of the half hour Priscilla had given to vanity were more evident, Graham thought, than in Peggy's case. Peggy could be disheveled and still irresistible. Priscilla's rather stately beauty was more exacting in its demands. In her dress of pale green voile, which set off her clear pallor and the beauty of her smooth, dark hair, she looked the incarnate spirit of spring. Even Graham stared.

Peggy, her arm slipped caressingly through Priscilla's, led her forward. "Priscilla, this is Graham's friend, Mr. Kennedy. Miss Combs—"

Peggy stopped short. Priscilla had jumped. Mr. Kennedy's conventional smile had changed to [292] startled recognition. "Why, you know each other," Peggy cried.

"Only—why, surely, Peggy, you remember."

Peggy's vague, irritating certainty of something familiar in Mr. Kennedy's face was suddenly transformed to recollection. "Oh, of course. The Green Parrot."

"Oh, of course! The Green Parrot!" mocked Graham, who had risen on Priscilla's entrance, and now stood looking from one to another of the trio. "Makes it perfectly clear."

They took their seats, and Peggy explained, helped out by suggestions from the others. As they recalled the absurd experience, the three narrators went off into fits of laughter, but the audience maintained a dignified calm.

"Take my word for it, John, it's an inscrutable sex. Now, I would have sworn that this young woman hadn't a thought I didn't share, and look what she's been keeping from me, lo! these many months. When we're alone I shall expect you to give me a full account of what really happened."

For some reason the discovery that Graham's friend, Kennedy, was the young man whose coffee cup had been invaded by Priscilla's roll seemed to put him at once on the footing of an old [293] acquaintance. They had a very jolly evening, and it was not till after ten that Priscilla said, "Graham, I think you'd better take me home, now. I've got a busy day before me."

"You have indeed, poor dear," Peggy cried. "I expect you to finish addressing those invitations and do any number of errands. These are trying times for my friends, Mr. Kennedy. They have hardly a minute in the twenty-four hours that they can call their own."

The young man smiled at her in the abstracted fashion of one whose thoughts are on something else. "Won't you let me be your escort?" he asked Priscilla. "It would give me the greatest pleasure."

"Thanks, but it's only a step, and my going early won't break up Graham's evening, for he'll come directly back." She softened her refusal by giving him her hand and saying pleasantly, "I'm glad to have met you properly at last, with a real introduction, you know."

"I shall look forward to the next time," said young Kennedy, with rather more ardor than [294] conventional courtesy required. "This is our third meeting, I believe."

"Third?" exclaimed Peggy, pricking up her ears. "Why, when was the second?"

"At one of the football games last fall," explained Priscilla. "I was there with Horace Hitchcock, and Mr. Kennedy sat next me." And then recalling the suspicious glances Horace had shot in the direction of the guiltless Mr. Kennedy, Priscilla began to blush. The worst of blushing is that it is much easier to start it than to call a halt. There were innumerable things connected with the thought of Horace that made Priscilla uncomfortable, and now she found herself blushing for them all. The tide of color flooded her smooth forehead and dyed her throat. Peggy's observant eyes detected an unmistakable shadow on Mr. Kennedy's erst-while radiant face.

Later, when Graham and herself were alone, she scolded him a little. "You oughtn't to have said that a friend of mine had a case on Hitchcock. Now Mr. Kennedy knows you meant Priscilla."

"Well, is that such a tragedy?" [295]

"Couldn't you mention to him some day that Horace did admire Priscilla, but that now he's safely married to another. You could bring it in in a casual way, you know."

Graham looked at her hard. "My dear Peggy," he said, "Just because you yourself have been fortunate—unusually fortunate I might say—in your love affairs, don't let that lead you into trying your hand at matchmaking. Fooling with high explosives is child's play compared to that, believe me."

But instead of seeming impressed by the warning, Peggy only answered dreamily, "When he doesn't see Horace at the wedding, he'll probably begin to suspect that it's ancient history. If only Priscilla could learn to speak of him without blushing."

CHAPTER XXI
A MISSING BRIDE

[296]

It was two days before Peggy's wedding, and in the front room downstairs Peggy was looking around complacently on her wedding presents. They were very much like the wedding presents of other prospective brides. A few were admirably suited to the needs of a young couple of moderate means, about to start house-keeping. Others would have been useful in the establishments of wealthy people who expected to do a great deal of entertaining. And there were still others whose use was problematical, anywhere and under any circumstances.

Peggy's mood, however, was far from critical. Each gift as it came had given her the keenest pleasure, and if it were impossible to find anything admirable in the article itself, she could always say, "How awfully kind of them to send it. Everybody's being perfectly dear to me." She [297] approached every newly arrived package with the same feeling with which she had once taken up a bulging Christmas stocking.

The clock in the dining room, a pert little timepiece with a peremptory voice, struck three. It was characteristic of this particular clock always to strike the hour as if it were reminding somebody of something. On this occasion it reminded Peggy that she had an engagement with the dressmaker at half past three, and that she was to call for Ruth, who had promised to accompany her. As it was impossible to take along a crowd of girls to the dressmaker's rather cramped quarters, Peggy avoided hard feeling by inviting a different girl each day.

Peggy had hardly reached the top of the stairs when the bell rang, and Sally came rushing from the kitchen to answer it. The prospect of a wedding in the family had so excited Sally that she was even less responsible for her conduct than usual. Almost the only thing she could be trusted to do was to answer the door-bell, but as the bell rang very often, she succeeded in making herself rather useful. On this occasion a swarthy woman stood outside, and in a quick, [298] parrot-like fashion said something Sally did not understand.

"You want to see Miss Peggy?" Sally demanded. Such wits as she possessed were not on duty, for ordinarily she would have recognized the stranger's errand, and sent her about her business. As the woman nodded, Sally at once admitted her, showing her into the room where the wedding presents stood about in picturesque confusion.

"Miss Peggy," shrieked Sally, forgetting for the moment the lesson impressed on her on innumerable occasions that she was not to save her steps by calling up the stairs, "Somebody to see you."

It was a minute or two before Peggy came down, and Sally had retreated to the kitchen in the meantime. Peggy who had naturally expected to see an acquaintance, was rather startled to be confronted by a dark-skinned woman with jet black eyes and an oily voice.

"Buy lace, lady? Very cheap: three inch wide up to nine inch. Very cheap!"

Peggy replied politely that she did not care for any lace, reflecting as she spoke that had the [299] woman presented herself a few months earlier, she might have thought it worth while to examine her stock. Having had some experience in the persistence of her kind, she was surprised when the dark woman took her refusal as final, and meekly let herself out. Peggy stepped into the kitchen to warn Sally against her late indiscretion, and came back through the hall, reflecting that she must hurry, since the dressmaker did not like to be kept waiting. As she passed the open door of the room the vender of lace had so lately quitted, she stopped and stood transfixed.

One of her wedding presents was missing. She knew exactly the place where it had stood on the center table, flanked on one side by a pair of book-ends, and on the other by a cloisonné vase. The gap left by its removal was as obvious to Peggy's startled eyes as the breach in a smile, due to a missing tooth. Instantly she understood that there was no mystery about its disappearance. She had seen it not ten minutes before, and the only person who had entered the room since then was the woman with lace to sell.

The discovery went to Peggy's head. The stealing of any of her other possessions would not [300] have affected her in just the same way. But these were her wedding presents, invested with a certain sanctity because of the goodwill they represented, and the occasion which led to their bestowal. It never once occurred to Peggy that she could submit to such an outrage.

She ran out of the house, looking up and down the street, and immediately caught sight of the woman she wanted. Apparently she had suspended business for the day, for she was walking, rapidly and making no attempt to dispose of her wares in any of the houses she passed. Peggy promptly started in pursuit. Her idea was to follow the woman, keeping her in sight until she could encounter a policeman. Peggy had no desire to deprive any human creature, however erring, of her liberty. She hoped the officer of the law would force the surrender of her ill-gotten gains without formally arresting her. But whatever the consequences, she meant to recover her property.

According to the calendar it was the last day of June, but the thermometer proclaimed it mid- [301] July. The heated air quivered. The streets seemed as silent as the thoroughfares of a deserted

village. A block from Peggy's home, the woman took the right-hand turning and went down Rossiter Street. Peggy followed, walking rapidly in her determination to gain on the quick-walking figure on ahead.

Three blocks on Rossiter Street, and then the woman turned north, giving Peggy a clew to her plan. Friendly Terrace lay near the outskirts of the city. A walk of a mile from Peggy's home brought one into a section sparsely settled. It looked as though Peggy's quarry were making for the open country.

Oh, for a policeman! Peggy rather unjustly resented the scarcity of officers of the law, forgetting how seldom their services were required in the law-abiding part of town. She discovered, too, that the woman pursued was uncannily aware of her pursuer. Though apparently she never looked back, she accommodated her pace to Peggy's, accelerating her speed, as Peggy quickened hers, so that the distance between them remained about the same in spite of Peggy's [302] efforts to lessen it.

Owing to the lack of policemen, had any reliable looking man passed her in a car, Peggy believed herself capable of stopping him and commandeering his services. But apparently the heat had driven every one indoors. Two or three delivery wagons passed with small boys handling the reins. One machine glided by, but the driver was a woman. After an hour's chase the two participants in the singular game of "Follow my Leader," came out upon the turnpike, stretching away to the north, white and dusty and hot in the brilliant sun. Here the houses were scattered and stood back from the road. The likelihood of encountering a policeman had become extremely faint. But Peggy set her teeth and pressed forward.

Graham got off half an hour early this particular afternoon, and reached Peggy's a little before five. Irma, dimpled and sweet, a replica of Dorothy a few years earlier, rushed to meet him squealing with delight, while Dorothy smiled a welcome, her lips pinched tightly together. One of Dorothy's upper front teeth was missing and Dorothy was painfully conscious of the lack every [303] minute that she was awake.

Graham kissed his prospective nieces, greeted the older members of the family cordially, if less effusively, and put the inevitable question, "Where's Peggy?"

"Oh, at the dressmaker's of course," sighed Mrs. Raymond. "I hope she won't keep the poor child very long. It's so dreadfully warm."

The telephone tinkled, and Dick went to answer it. He scowled as he listened. "Who did you say it was? Oh, wait a minute!" He turned to his mother. "I thought you said Peggy had gone to the dressmaker's."

"She has. She had a fitting at half past three."

"Well, this is the dressmaker, and she says Peggy hasn't come."

"Let me speak to her." Mrs. Raymond crossed to the phone, with an air of expecting to clear up the puzzle immediately. And hardly had she made herself known, when the door opened and Ruth appeared. "What's become of Peggy? She was to call for me a little after three, and I've had my [304] hat on waiting for her nearly two hours."

What had become of Peggy? She had not kept her engagement with the dressmaker, and Ruth knew nothing of her whereabouts. Mrs. Raymond called up Priscilla and Amy, each of whom disavowed having seen Peggy since noon. And then as there seemed nothing better to do, she went on calling neighbors and friends and trades-people, growing more and more puzzled, moment by moment. For no one had seen Peggy.

It finally occurred to Peggy's sister, Alice, to make inquiries in the kitchen. Sally informed her that Miss Peggy had come into the kitchen with her hat on, and had said something about the dressmaker. The new girl, who had been engaged to help out for the few weeks before the wedding, confirmed Sally's story, adding that it was a little after three when Peggy left the house. Obviously Peggy had started out with the intention of keeping her appointment, and obviously she had not done so.

Dinner was ready at six o'clock, but no one was ready for dinner. Peggy's failure to appear at [305] meal-time added to the general consternation. Peggy was by nature prompt and methodical, and she had acted the rôle of cook too often not to realize how the best efforts of that important functionary are frustrated by late arrivals. At quarter past six Mr. Raymond went to the telephone and called up the hospitals one after another. But the hot sleepy day had not been productive of automobile accidents, and the only cases of sun-strokes reported were elderly people, four men and one old woman.

Graham was very pale. A dreadful suspicion was taking shape in his mind. Could it be that, as the second of July drew near, Peggy had found herself unable to face the situation? Perhaps he had asked too much of her when he had urged her accompanying him to South America. He thought of the innumerable ties that bound her to her native land, and yet he had assumed that she would be ready to leave everything and every one she loved, and go with him to a land of strangers. Graham was no more troubled by excessive humility than other popular young men, but in the present emergency he seemed to himself to have put a most preposterous estimate on [306] the value of his own society. He had a horrible conviction that, through his demanding too much, Peggy was lost to him forever.

It hardly need be said that no one in the anxious company shared this particular apprehension. At seven o'clock Peggy's father made up his mind that it would be necessary to appeal to the police. But before he could bring himself to act on this conviction, the gate clicked and Irma, standing at the window, her nose flattened against the screen, exploded in a series of joyful shrieks.

"Aunt Peggy! Aunt Peggy! Oh, it's Aunt Peggy!"

And Peggy it was, though it took a second glance to be sure. The perspiration trickling over her dusty face had produced a curious piebald effect, and she walked with a noticeable limp. They rushed to the door, greeting her with mingled cries of joy and reproach. All but Graham. He sat down in the darkest corner of the living room and put his hands over his face. The intensity of [307]
his relief was almost too much for him.

Peggy limped in, looking decidedly ashamed of herself.

"Have you waited dinner for me? I'm awfully sorry."

"Waited dinner," repeated Mrs. Raymond, and burst into tears. Peggy's sister Alice caught her by the shoulders and gave her a sharp little shake.

"Peggy Raymond, where have you been and what have you been doing? Don't you understand that we've been frightened to death about you?"

Peggy dropped into the nearest chair and began on her story. She told of the woman Sally had admitted to the house, the missing wedding present, and the purpose with which she had started in pursuit. They all listened breathlessly, Graham left his corner and stood back of the others, unwilling to miss a word.

It was not till Peggy's recital brought her to the turnpike that she lost a little of her fluency. At this point she hesitated and seemed to appreciate the difficulty of making matters clear to her [308]
audience. "Of course I should have given up then. But somehow I couldn't. I kept hoping that somebody would appear, and it seemed such a shame when I'd followed that thief so far, to give up and go back. I'd made up my mind that as soon as an automobile came along, I'd ask for a lift. I felt if I could only catch up with her I could frighten her into giving me what belonged to me. But nobody passed me, and then when she got to the old toll-gate—"

Mr. Raymond interrupted, "You don't mean you followed her to the toll gate?"

"Yes, father. Or at least I was almost there. You know there's a cross-road just beyond the gate, and a Ford car came up that cross-road and turned north on the pike. And the woman stopped it —"

"Confederates, I'll bet," cried Dick.

"No, it looked as if she were just asking some stranger for a ride. And as far as they knew she was only a tired woman carrying a bag and they took her in. And then I saw it wasn't any use to go further."

"You surprise me." Mr. Raymond's voice was satirical. "I can't understand why you didn't run [309]
after the machine."

Peggy accepted the sarcastic rejoinder meekly. "Then I turned around and came home. But you see I had put on my new brown shoes because Mrs. Morley wanted to fit my brown dress with the shoes I was going to wear with it, and all at once they began to hurt me terribly. Instead of hurrying I had to slow up, and sometimes I had to stop and wait. I never had anything hurt so."

"If you'd walked three blocks east," exclaimed Graham, speaking for the first time, "you could have got a car."

"I knew it, but I'd come off without my pocket book. I didn't have a penny with me. That was the reason I didn't telephone."

Peggy looked about her with a crestfallen air. While she was far from realizing the extent of the alarm her family had felt, and would not have believed Graham had he told her of the apprehensions that had tortured him through the terrible time of waiting, she understood that they had all been worried and that she had inconvenienced every one by making dinner late. [310]
"Don't wait for me any longer," she pleaded. "Have the dinner put on, mother, and I'll be down as soon as I've washed up a little."

Mrs. Raymond put her arm about her. "Yes, come upstairs, darling. You must have something on those blisters right away. Alice, tell Sally to put on plates for Ruth and Graham."

It was while they were eating lamb chops, which after an hour and a half in the warming oven might as well have been anything else, that some one thought to put the question Peggy had been dreading. "Do you know what present she stole?"

Peggy took a hasty sip of her iced tea and looked appealingly at her questioner. But her reluctant manner only aroused the curiosity of every one.

"I'll bet it was the silver teapot," exclaimed Dick.

"It doesn't matter what's missing, as long as Peggy herself is here safe and sound," declared

Mrs. Raymond fervently.

"But what *did* she take?" insisted Alice, eyeing her sister with suspicion. [311]

Again Peggy forfeited herself with iced tea, and her cheeks, flushed by heat and weariness, took on a deeper hue. "It—it really wasn't so valuable,—" stammered Peggy. "You know Elvira Bond gave me half a dozen teaspoons that she got by saving soap wrappers or something. They came in a neat little case, and I suppose the woman snatched the nearest thing without looking. I didn't chase her because the spoons were worth so much because—well, it was the principle of the thing."

There was a long moment of silence, and then a roar of laughter. They laughed long and helplessly and wiped their eyes and started all over again. As a rule Peggy could appreciate a joke, even if it was against herself, but on this occasion a rather wry smile was the best she could do. She was beginning to realize that she had been very silly.

"Well, Graham," remarked Mr. Raymond when he could make himself heard, "In my opinion you're assuming quite a responsibility in planning to take this young woman to South America." [312]

Graham's eyes met Peggy's and something in his look arrested her attention, a peculiar radiance as if he had just heard a wonderful piece of news. But all he said was, "I'm ready to take the risk, sir."

CHAPTER XXII [313]
A JULY WEDDING

PEGGY'S brother Dick had parodied an old rhyme to fit the occasion and sang it with gusto, in season and out of season. It was Dick's voice, caroling in a high falsetto, and breaking ludicrously on an average of once a line, that woke Peggy on the most eventful morning of her life.

"A wedding day in May
Is worth a load of hay.
A wedding set for June
Is worth a silver spoon.
A wedding in July
Isn't worth a fly."

Peggy winked hard and sat up in bed, turning instantly toward the east windows. "Oh," she cried joyously, "what a glorious day!" And so indeed it was. Apparently the weather man had carefully selected whatever was best in all the year, and combined his selections into one perfect [314] day in honor of Peggy's wedding. There had been a little rain the night before, and the air was as sweet as if perfumed by June's roses. There was a freshness that suggested early spring, and something in the breeze as exhilarating as October. Peggy reflected complacently that this was just her luck.

She wondered, as she dressed, what she was to do with herself between the hours of eight and six. Her trunk was packed for going away, and the other trunks were ready except for a few articles to be added at the last minute. She had acknowledged every gift she had received. The dressmaker was through with her, and the wedding dress was hanging in Peggy's closet, with a sheet draped over it that no speck of dust should mar its immaculate whiteness. Peggy decided that her wedding day was to be characterized by elegant leisure.

Of course this expectation was not realized. To begin with, there were more presents. They came by parcels post and by express. Deliverymen handed them over as nonchalantly as if they had been ordinary purchases. Others came by special messengers, who grinned knowingly when [315] Peggy signed for them. Breakfast was hardly over when it was necessary to send for Graham, that he might assist in opening the packages. But Graham was not as satisfactory in opening packages as a number of other people, Priscilla and Amy, for instance. If Peggy cried "Isn't that beautiful?" he always looked straight at her as he said "yes," and then it was necessary to remind him that he was supposed to be admiring a piece of silverware or glass. Peggy always said, "How beautiful!" when a package was opened. And then if the article were something she really wanted, she would add, "Isn't it lucky, Graham, that some one thought of that? I don't see how we could have kept house without it." And if it were something quite unsuitable she would cry, "How kind everybody is. I never saw anything like it."

The present from Peggy's college class came the morning of the wedding day, when it was practically certain that no one was to be married in advance of Peggy. It was a very attractive [316] silver vase, with the class motto engraved about its base. Peggy's delight was marred by one characteristic reflection. "I have so many things. It's almost a pity this didn't go to some girl whose friends weren't so generous."

"Any one could have had it," Graham reminded her, "who was ready to take the risk. This is in recognition of your courage, like the Victoria Cross."

Of course the wedding presents were not going to South America, but were to be stored

against the young people's return. "Don't you hate to go away and leave all these lovely things, Graham?" Peggy asked, stroking the gleaming sides of a copper bowl as if it had been a kitten. And then with her usual happy faculty for seeing the bright side, she added, "But think of coming home and finding them waiting for us! Why, it'll be like getting married all over again."

Wedding presents, however, were not to occupy Peggy's thoughts to the exclusion of other matters. All sorts of affectionate messages kept coming, special deliveries, telegrams, telephone [317] calls. A girl like Peggy, who for twenty-one years and over has been helping to make the world a happier place, is likely to be surprised when she comes to count up her friends. Elaine Marshall, who had moved from the city and now lived with her married sister, came down for the day. "I couldn't stand it, not to be at your wedding, Peggy," she declared. And Lucy Haines walked in about noon, looking so radiant that Peggy at once suspected an especial reason. There was a little pearl ring on the third finger of Lucy's left hand that Peggy had never seen before. Lucy blushed when she saw Peggy's contemplative gaze focused on it.

"Yes, Peggy, it's—it's Jerry," owned Lucy, looking so proud and happy that she did not seem even distantly related to the disheartened girl who had once thought it was no use trying. "He's grown into such a splendid fellow. Everybody says I'm so lucky. And, Peggy, if it hadn't been for the summer you spent at Doolittle Cottage, it's not likely that either of us would ever have amounted to anything."

Mary Donaldson called up to say that she was coming to the wedding. Her father and cousin [318] had promised to carry her downstairs, and they were going early so she could be in her place before any one else arrived. "I don't believe you're a bit more excited than I am, Peggy," Mary laughed. And another surprise was when Uncle Philander and his wife drove into town, with a bushel or two of flowers piled about them in the buggy.

"They're not such awful stylish flowers," beamed Aunt Phoebe. "Of course there's a few roses, but most of our bushes bloomed themselves 'most to death in June and haven't done much since. The rest are just everyday posies, so to speak, but they'll make little bright spots around the house, and anyway, you can't have too many flowers at a wedding."

At four o'clock the bridesmaids went home to dress. The mother of the flower girl pounced on her and carried her upstairs.

"Peggy, dear," said Mrs. Raymond warningly.

"Just a minute mother. I want to tell Graham something." Peggy led her lover into a corner and whispered in his ear, "Don't you want to come back and get a glimpse of me after I'm dressed." [319]

"Well rather."

"Because you know, if you don't like me," dimpled Peggy, "it's not too late to change your mind." She was inclined to be reproachful when Graham caught her in his arms and kissed her before everybody, but Graham insisted it was her own fault, and on reflection Peggy decided he was right.

At six o'clock the little church was well filled. In spite of Graham's teasing, Peggy's humble friends could hardly be distinguished from their so-called betters. Hildegarde Carey, slender and elegant, sat in the pew behind Elvira Bond, and noticed nothing peculiar except that Elvira blew her nose oftener and with more emphasis than is customary on such occasions. It was either that or weep, and Elvira chose the least of the two evils. As for Jimmy Dunn, with his purple necktie and a large scarfpin that resembled a diamond, he was fairly resplendent.

The march pealed out and the people rose. Up the aisle came the bridesmaids walking very [320] slowly. The little flower girl, all smiles, seemed as unconscious as if weddings were an old story in her experience. And then came Peggy on her father's arm, and Elvira Bond was not the only one whose eyes brimmed over as she passed.

A great deal can happen in five minutes. The organ pealed out again, and now Peggy was Mrs. Graham Wylie. She put her hand on her husband's arm and smiled up into his face, Peggy's own sunny smile. She had promised for better or for worse, but in her heart of hearts she was confident that the future held only good for the two of them. And as Graham was equally positive on that score, they went down the aisle with illumined faces.

Only a few besides the two families came to the house from the church. These, with the out-of-town guests like Elaine and Lucy, and the wedding party, filled the cosy little house to overflowing. Mary Donaldson sat in a corner, radiant; and since she could not cross the room to kiss the bride, the bride crossed to kiss her.

It was after the chicken salad had been disposed of, and they were passing the ice cream, that [321] Peggy's attention focussed itself on her new friend, Mr. Kennedy. He stood by himself for the moment and his face was rather grave for a young man, a guest at a wedding. But as he caught her eye, he smiled resolutely and came over to her.

"I'm sorry you're going away, Mrs. Wylie, just as I met you. It doesn't seem fair."

"I'm sorry, too," said Peggy. "If we'd only known that night at the Green Parrot that you were a friend of Graham's it would have simplified matters so much."

Mr. Kennedy's face again lost its smile. He turned and looked the company over. "Your friend

Hitchcock isn't here to-night, is he?"

Peggy was delighted. She had been wishing for a chance to bring Horace into the conversation, and here Mr. Kennedy had done it himself. When again the young man looked at her, he was almost startled by the radiant mischief of her face.

"Horace Hitchcock here? Oh, dear, no! I can't think of anybody I'd be less likely to ask to my wedding."

"That's one point, evidently, on which you and Miss Combs are not in agreement." [322]

Peggy pondered. "Priscilla might ask him to her wedding. I don't know. But it's certain he didn't ask *her* to *his*."

Young Mr. Kennedy's start was unmistakable. "You don't mean he's married?"

"Yes indeed. There was quite an account of it in the papers. But if you didn't know his name, you wouldn't remember."

"No, I wouldn't remember," agreed Mr. Kennedy. All at once he was beaming. "I shall be glad when the next two years are up, Mrs. Wylie," he cried boyishly. "I have a hunch that you and I are going to be great friends."

A moment later he joined Priscilla, and from that time on followed her about like her shadow, and the observant Peggy smiled approval. She was not in the least discomfited by Graham's reference to high explosives. The most dangerous things in the world, in her estimation, were misunderstandings.

At ten o'clock the bride went upstairs to change to her little going-away suit with the Eton Jacket, that made her look hardly older than the Peggy Raymond who entered college. And then the good-bys began. "We'll be back in a few days," said Peggy as she kissed each one, but even that assurance failed to give comfort. For though Peggy and Graham were coming back for twenty-four hours, they were to sail on the sixth. Peggy's friends returned her smiles bravely, but there was hardly one who did not struggle to keep back the tears. [323]

They crowded out on the porch to see her go. Some one hurled an old shoe as the taxi-cab glided away. Peggy leaned from the window to wave her hand, and then the darkness swallowed her up.

Amy, Ruth, and Priscilla stood side by side. The tears were running down Ruth's cheeks, and Priscilla's eyes were wet. Amy had forced herself to smile during Peggy's protracted leave-taking and the smile persisted, though it had become a grimace.

"Is this place called Friendly Terrace?" Amy demanded tragically, "Or is it the—the Dismal Swamp."

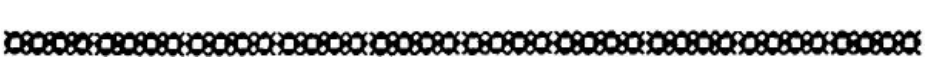
"Or the desert of Sahara," suggested Priscilla, a quaver in her voice showing that the suggestion was not altogether a joke. [324]

"Girls!" for a moment Ruth struggled with a sob, but she conquered it and went on resolutely, "I don't know who named Friendly Terrace, but I do know it was Peggy who made the name fit. And we've got to keep it up. We can't let it become like other little streets where nobody cares for his neighbor. We've got to show what Peggy meant to us by—by—"

"By keeping the home fires burning," interpolated Amy, and Ruth nodded as if the familiar phrase said all she had wished to say.

As the others crowded indoors, declaring after immemorial fashion that there had never been a prettier wedding nor a lovelier bride, Peggy's three friends stood side by side; Ruth's hand was fast in Amy's, and Amy's arm was about Priscilla's waist. And while none of them spoke, each of them in her heart was silently pledging herself to keep Friendly Terrace what Peggy had made it.

THE END



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Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired while varied hyphenation has been retained.

Page 11, "asumed" changed to "assumed" (assumed that they had)

Page 75, the ligature was removed from "Phoebe" to conform to the numerous uses without it (turned to Aunt Phoebe's)

Page 115, "epigramatic" changed to "epigrammatic" (epigrammatic phrases which)

Page 172, "your're" changed to "you're" (what you're looking for)

Page 180, "Rob" changed to "Bob" (absorbed by what Bob)

Page 184, "publicity" changed to "publicly" (publicly that she was)

Page 184, "incomprehensiblely" changed to "incomprehensibly" (incomprehensibly petty)

Page 186, repeated word "the" removed from text. Original read (how much . was the the result of)

Page 199, "upstair" changed to "upstairs" (upstairs Ruth? It's)

Page 205, "fiinished" changed to "finished" (After she had finished)

Page 207, "tumultous" changed to "tumultuous" (tumultuous cheering, the)

Page 210, "forseen" changed to "foreseen" (have foreseen this)

Page 238, repeated word "to" removed from text. Original read (four to to get engaged)

Page 261, "rudness" changed to "rudeness" (The rudeness gave Peggy)

Page 262, "af" changed to "of" (losing two of her)

Page 271, "spare" changed to "space" (vacant space enclosed by)

Page 272, "attenion" changed to "attention" (Priscilla every attention)

Page 279, "emphazie" changed to "emphasize" (to emphasize the fact)

Page 301, "There" changed to "Three" (Three blocks on Rossiter)

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