Title: Fran

Author: J. Breckenridge Ellis

Release date: July 1, 2004 [EBook #6057]
Most recently updated: December 29, 2020

Language: English

Juliet Sutherland, Charles Franks and the Online Distributed Proofreading

Team.

FRAN

BY JOHN BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

W. B. KING

TO MY MOTHER

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR

Fran knocked at the front door. It was too dark for her to find the bell; however, had she found it, she would have knocked just the same.

At first, no one answered. That was not surprising, since everybody was supposed to be at the Union Camp-meeting that had been advertised for the last two months. Of course it was not beyond possibility that some one might have stayed at home to invite his soul instead of getting it saved; but that any one in Littleburg should go visiting at half-past eight, and especially that any one should come knocking at the door of this particular house, was almost incredible. No doubt that is why the young woman who finally opened the door— after Fran had subjected it to a second and more prolonged visitation of her small fist—looked at the stranger with surprise which was, in itself, reproof. Standing in the dim light that reached the porch from the hall, Fran's appearance was not above suspicion. She looked very dark, sharp-faced, and small. Her attitude suggested one who wanted something and had come to ask for it. The lady in the doorway believed herself confronted by a "camper"—one of those flitting birds of outer darkness who have no religion of their own, but who are always putting that of others to the proof.

The voice from the doorway was cool, impersonal, as if, by its very aloofness, it would push the wanderer away: "What do you want?"

"I want Hamilton Gregory," Fran answered promptly, without the slightest trace of embarrassment.

"I'm told he lives here."

"*Mr.* Gregory"—offering the name with its title as a palpable rebuke—"lives here, but is not at home. What do you want, little girl?"

"Where is he?" Fran asked, undaunted.

At first the young woman was tempted to close the door upon the impudent gaze that never faltered in watching her, but those bright unwavering eyes, gleaming out of the gloom of straw hat and overshadowing hair, compelled recognition of some sort.

"He is at the camp-meeting," she answered reluctantly, irritated at opposition, and displeased with herself for being irritated. "What do you want with him? I will attend to whatever it is. I am acquainted with all of his affairs—I am his secretary."

"Where is that camp-meeting? How can I find the place?" was Fran's quick rejoinder. She could not explain the dislike rising within her. She was too young, herself, to consider the other's youth an advantage, but the beauty of the imperious woman in the doorway—why did it not stir her admiration?

Mr. Gregory's secretary reflected that, despite its seeming improbability, it might be important for him to see this queer creature who came to strange doors at night-time.

"If you will go straight down that road"—she pointed—"and keep on for about a mile and a half, you will come to the big tent. Mr. Gregory will be in the tent, leading the choir."

"All right." And turning her back on the door, Fran swiftly gained the front steps. Half-way down, she paused, and glanced over her thin shoulder. Standing thus, nothing was to be seen of her but a blurred outline, and the shining of her eyes.

"I guess," said Fran inscrutably, "you're not Mrs. Gregory."

"No," came the answer, with an almost imperceptible change of manner— a change as of gradual petrifaction, "I am not Mrs. Gregory." And with that the lady, who was not Mrs. Gregory, quietly but forcibly closed the door.

It was as if, with the closing of that door, she would have shut Fran out of her life.

CHAPTER II

A DISTURBING LAUGH

A long stretch of wooden sidewalks with here and there a leprous breaking out of granitoid; a succession of dwellings, each in its yard of bluegrass, maple trees, and whitewashed palings, with several residences fine enough to excite wonder—for modest cottages set the architectural pace in the village; a stretch of open country beyond the corporate limits, with a footbridge to span the deep ravine —and then, at last, a sudden glow in the darkness not caused by the moon, with a circle of stamping and neighing horses encompassing the glow.

The sermon was ended, the exhortation was at the point of loudest voice and most impassioned earnestness. A number of men, most of them young, thronged the footpath leading from the stiles to the tent. A few were smoking; all were waiting for the pretty girls to come forth from the Christian camp. Fran pushed her way among the idlers with admirable nonchalance, her sharp elbow ready for the first resistive pair of ribs.

The crowd outside did not argue a scarcity of seats under the canvas. Fran found a plank without a back, loosely disposed, and entirely unoccupied. She seated herself, straight as an Indian, and with the air of being very much at ease.

The scene was new to her. More than a thousand villagers, ranged along a natural declivity, looked

down upon the platform of undressed pine. In front of the platform men and women were kneeling on the ground. Some were bathed in tears; some were praying aloud; some were talking to those who stood, or knelt beside them; some were clasping convulsive hands; all were oblivious of surroundings.

Occasionally one heard above the stentorian voice of the exhorter, above the prayers and exclamations of the "seekers", a sudden shout of exultation—"Bless the Lord!" or a rapturous "*A-a-*MEN!" Then a kneeling figure would rise, and the exhorter would break off his plea to cry, "Our brother has found the Lord!"

From the hundred members of the choir, Fran singled out the man she had been seeking for so many years. It was easy enough to distinguish him from the singers who crowded the platform, not only by his baton which proclaimed the choir-leader, but by his resemblance to the picture she had discovered in a New York Sunday Supplement.

Hamilton Gregory was clean-shaved except for a silken reddish mustache; his complexion was fair, his hair a shade between red and brown, his eyes blue. His finely marked face and striking bearing were stamped with distinction and grace.

It was strange to Fran that he did not once glance in her direction. True, there was nothing in her appearance to excite especial attention, but she had looked forward to meeting him ever since she could remember. Now that her eyes were fastened on his face, now that they were so near, sheltered by a common roof, how could he help feeling her presence?

The choir-leader rose and lifted his baton. At his back the hundred men and women obeyed the signal, while hymn-books fluttered open throughout the congregation. Suddenly the leader of the choir started into galvanic life. He led the song with his sweet voice, his swaying body, his frantic baton, his wild arms, his imperious feet. With all that there was of him, he conducted the melodious charge up the ramparts of sin and indifference. If in repose, Fran had thought him singularly handsome and attractive, she now found him inspiring. His blue eyes burned with exaltation while his magic voice seemed to thrill with more than human ecstasy. The strong, slim, white hand tensely grasping the baton, was the hand of a powerful chieftain wielded in behalf of the God of Battles.

On the left, the heavy bass was singing,

> "One thing we know,
> Wherever we go—
> We reap what we sow,
> We reap what we sow."

While these words were being doled out at long and impressive intervals, like the tolling of a heavy bell, more than half a hundred soprano voices were hastily getting in their requisite number of half notes, thus—

> "So scatter little, scatter little, scatter little, scatter
> little,
> Scatter little seeds of kindness."

In spite of the vast volume of sound produced by these voices, as well as by the accompaniment of two pianos and a snare-drum, the voice of Hamilton Gregory, soaring flute-like toward heaven, seemed to dart through the interstices of "rests", to thread its slender way along infinitesimal crevices of silence. One might have supposed that the booming bass, the eager chattering soprano, the tenor with its thin crust of upper layers, and the throaty fillings of the alto, could have left no vantage points for an obligato. Yet it was Hamilton Gregory's voice that bound all together in divine unity. As one listened, it was the inspired truth as uttered by Hamilton Gregory that brought the message home to conscience. As if one had never before been told that one reaps what one sows, uneasy memory started out of hidden places with its whisper of seed sown amiss. Tears rose to many eyes, and smothered sobs betrayed intense emotion.

Of those who were not in the least affected, Fran was one. She saw and heard Hamilton Gregory's impassioned earnestness, and divined his yearning to touch many hearts; nor did she doubt that he would then and there have given his life to press home upon the erring that they must ultimately reap what they were sowing. Nevertheless she was altogether unmoved. It would have been easier for her to laugh than to cry.

Although the preacher had ceased his exhortations for the singing of the evangelistic hymn, he was by no means at the end of his resources. Standing at the margin of the platform, looking out on the congregation, he slowly moved back and forth his magnetic arms in parallel lines. Without turning his body, it was as if he were cautiously sweeping aside the invisible curtain of doubt that swung between

the unsaved and the altar. "This way," he seemed to say. "Follow my hands."

Not one word did he speak. Even between the verses, when he might have striven against the pianos and the snare-drum, he maintained his terrible silence. But as he fixed his ardent eyes upon space, as he moved those impelling arms, a man would rise here, a woman start up there—reluctantly, or eagerly, the unsaved would press their way to the group kneeling at the front. Prayers and groans rose louder. Jubilant shouts of religious victory were more frequent. One could, now hardly hear the choir as it insisted—

"We reap what we sow,
We reap what we sow."

Suddenly the evangelist smote his hands together, a signal for song and prayer to cease.

Having obtained a silence that was breathless he leaned over the edge of the platform, and addressed a man who knelt upon the ground:

"Brother Clinton, can't you get it?"

The man shook his head. "You've been kneeling there night after night," the evangelist continued; "don't you feel that the Lord loves you? Can't you feel it? Can't you feel it *now?* Can't you get it? Can't you get it *now?* Brother Clinton, I want you to get through before these revival services close. They close this night. I go away to-morrow. This may be your last opportunity. I want you to get it now. All these waiting friends want you to get it now. All these praying neighbors want to *see* you get it. Can't you get through to- night? Just quietly here, without any excitement, without any noise or tumult, just you and your soul alone together—Brother Clinton, can't you get through to-night?"

Brother Clinton shook his head.

Fran laughed aloud.

The evangelist had already turned to Hamilton Gregory as a signal for the hymn to be resumed, for sometimes singing helped them "through", but the sound of irreverent laughter chilled his blood. To his highly wrought emotional nature, that sound of mirth came as the laughter of fiends over the tragedy of an immortal soul.

"Several times," he cried, with whitened face, "these services have been disturbed by the ungodly." He pointed an inflexible finger at Fran: "Yonder sits a little girl who should not have been allowed in this tent unaccompanied by her parents. Brethren! Too much is at stake, at moments like these, to shrink from heroic measures. Souls are here, waiting to be saved. Let that little girl be removed. Where are the ushers? I hope she will go without disturbance, but go she shall! Now, Brother Gregory, sing."

The corps of ushers had been sadly depleted by the young men's inclination to bivouac outside, where one could see without being obliged to hear. As the song swept over the worshipers in a wave of pleading, such ushers as still remained, held a brief consultation. The task assigned them did not seem included in their proper functions. Only one could be found to volunteer as policeman, and he only because the evangelist's determined eye and rigid arm had never ceased to indicate the disturber of the peace.

Fran was furious; her small white face seemed cut in stone as she stared at the evangelist. How could she have known she was going to laugh? Her tumultuous emotions, inspired by the sight of Hamilton Gregory, might well have found expression in some other way. That laugh had been as a darting of tongue-flame directed against the armored Christian soldier whose face was so spiritually beautiful, whose voice was so eloquent.

Fran was suddenly aware of a man pausing irresolutely at the end of the plank that held her erect. Without turning her head, she asked in a rather spiteful voice, "Are you the sheriff?"

He spoke with conciliatory persuasiveness: "Won't you go with me, little girl?"

Fran turned impatiently to glare at the usher.

He was a fine young fellow of perhaps twenty-four, tall and straight, clean and wholesome. His eyes were sincere and earnest yet they promised much in the way of sunny smiles—at the proper time and place. His mouth was frank, his forehead open, his shoulders broad.

Fran rose as swiftly as if a giant hand had lifted her to her feet. "Come on, then," she said in a tone somewhat smothered. She climbed over the "stringer" at the end of her plank, and marched behind the young man as if oblivious of devouring eyes. The men at the tent- entrance scurried out of the way,

scattering the shavings and sawdust that lined the path.

As they passed the last pole that supported a gasolene-burner, Fran glanced up shyly from under her broad hat. The light burned red upon the young usher's face, and there was something in the crimson glow, or in the face, that made her feel like crying, just because—or so she fancied—it revived the recollection of her loneliness. And as she usually did what she felt like doing, she cried, silently, as she followed the young man out beneath the stars.

CHAPTER III

ON THE FOOT-BRIDGE

To the young usher, the change of scene was rather bewildering. His eyes were still full of the light from gasolene-burners, his ears still rang with the confusion of tent-noise into which entered the prolonged monotones of inarticulate groanings, and the explosive suddenness of seemingly irrelevant Amens. Above all, he tingled from the electric atmosphere of intense religious excitement; he was charged with currents at a pressure so high that his nerves were unresponsive to dull details of ordinary life.

Nothing just then mattered except the saving of souls. Having faithfully attended the camp-meeting for three weeks he found other interests blotted out. The village as a whole had given itself over to religious ecstasy. Those who had professed their faith left no stone unturned in leading others to the altar, as if life could not resume its routine until the unconverted were brought to kneel at the evangelist's feet.

As Abbott Ashton reflected that, because of this young girl with the mocking laugh, he was losing the climacteric expression of the three- weeks' campaign, his displeasure grew. Within him was an undefined thought vibration akin to surprise, caused by the serenity of the hushed sky. Was it not incongruous that the heavens should be so peaceful with their quiet star-beacons, while man was exerting himself to the utmost of gesture and noise to glorify the Maker of that calm canopy? From the weather-stained canvas rolled the warning, not unmusically:

"We reap what we sow,
We reap what we sow."

Above the tide of melody, the voice of the evangelist rose in a scream, appalling in its agony—"Oh, men and women, why *will* you die, *why* will you *die*?"

But the stars, looking down at the silent earth, spoke not of death, spoke only as stars, seeming to say, "Here are April days, dear old earth, balmy springtime and summer harvest before us!—What merry nights we shall pass together!" The earth answered with a sudden white smile, for the moon had just risen above the distant woods.

At the stile where the footpath from the tent ended, Abbott paused. Why should he go farther? This scoffer, the one false note in the meeting's harmony, had been silenced. "There," he said, showing the road. His tone was final. It meant, "Depart."

Fran spoke in a choking voice, "I'm afraid." It was not until then, that he knew she had been crying, for not once had he looked back. That she should cry, changed everything. And no wonder she was afraid. To the fences on either side of the country road, horses and mules were tethered. Torch-lights cast weird shadows. Here and there lounged dimly some fellow who preferred the society of side-kicking, shrilly neighing horses, to the suing melody of soul-seekers.

"But I must go back to the tent," said the usher softly, not surprised that a little girl should be afraid to venture among these vague terrors.

"I am so little," Fran said plaintively, "and the world is so large."

Abbott stood irresolute. To take Fran back to the tent would destroy the Influence, but it seemed

inhuman to send her away. He temporized rather weakly, "But you came here alone."

"But I'm not going away alone," said Fran. Her voice was still damp, but she had kept her resolution dry.

In the gloom, he vainly sought to discern her features. "Whose little girl are you?" he asked, not without an accent of gentle commiseration.

Fran, one foot on the first step of the stile, looked up at him; the sudden flare of a torch revealed the sorrow in her eyes. "I am nobody's little girl," she answered plaintively.

Her eyes were so large, and so soft and dark, that Abbott was glad she was only a child of fourteen—or fifteen, perhaps. Her face was so strangely eloquent in its yearning for something quite beyond his comprehension, that he decided, then and there, to be her friend. The unsteady light prevented definite perception of her face. He noted that her legs were thin, her arms long, her body slight, though there was a faint suggestion of curving outline of hips and bosom that lent an effect of charm.

There was, in truth, an element of charm in all he could discern. Even the thin limbs appealed to him oddly. Possibly the big hat helped to conceal or accentuate—at any rate, the effect was somewhat elfish. As for those great and luminously soft black eyes, he could not for the life of him have said what he saw in them to set his blood tingling with feeling of protecting tenderness. Possibly it was her trust in him, for as he gazed into the earnest eyes of Fran, it was like looking into a clear pool to see oneself.

"Nobody's little girl?" he repeated, inexpressibly touched that it should be so. What a treasure somebody was denied! "Are you a stranger in the town?"

"Never been here before," Fran answered mournfully.

"But why did you come?"

"I came to find Hamilton Gregory."

The young man was astonished. "Didn't you see him in the tent, leading the choir?"

"He has a house in town," Fran said timidly. "I don't want to bother him while he is in his religion. I want to wait for him at his house. Oh," she added earnestly, "if you would only show me the way."

Just as if she did not know the way!

Abbott Ashton was now completely at her mercy. "So you know Brother Gregory, do you?" he asked, as he led her over the stiles and down the wagon-road.

"Never saw him in my life," Fran replied casually. She knew how to say it prohibitively, but she purposely left the bars down, to find out if the young man was what she hoped.

And he was. He did not ask a question. They sought the grass-grown path bordering the dusty road; as they ascended the hill that shut out a view of the village, to their ears came the sprightly, Twentieth Century hymn. What change had come over Ashton that the song now seemed as strangely out of keeping as had the peacefulness of the April night, when he first left the tent? He felt the prick of remorse because in the midst of nature, he had so soon forgotten about souls.

Fran caught the air and softly sang—"We reap what we sow—"

"Don't!" he reproved her. "Child, that means nothing to you."

"Yes, it does, too," she returned, rather impudently. She continued to sing and hum until the last note was smothered in her little nose. Then she spoke: *"However*—it means a different thing to me from what it means to the choir."

He looked at her curiously. "How different?" he smiled.

"To me, it means that we really do reap what we sow, and that if we've done something very wrong in the past—*ugh!* Better look out— trouble's coming. That's what the song means to me."

"And will you kindly tell me what it means to the choir?"

"Yes, I'll tell you what it means to the choir. It means sitting on benches and singing, after a sermon; and it means a tent, and a great evangelist and a celebrated soloist—and then going home to act as if it wasn't so."

Abbott was not only astonished, but pained. Suddenly he had lost "Nobody's little girl", to be

confronted by an elfish spirit of mischief. He asked with constraint, "Did this critical attitude make you laugh out, in the tent?"

"I wouldn't tell you why I laughed," Fran declared, "for a thousand dollars. And I've seen more than that in my day."

They walked on. He was silent, she impenetrable. At last she said, in a changed voice, "My name's Fran. What's yours?"

He laughed boyishly. "Mine's Abbott."

His manner made her laugh sympathetically. It was just the manner she liked best—gay, frank, and a little mischievous. "Abbott?" she repeated; "well—is that all?"

"Ashton is the balance; Abbott Ashton. And yours?"

"The rest of mine is Nonpareil—funny name, isn't it!—Fran Nonpareil. It means Fran, the small type; or Fran who's unlike everybody else; or—Oh, there are lots of meanings to me. Some find one, some another, some never understand."

It was because Abbott Ashton was touched, that he spoke lightly:

"What a very young Nonpareil to be wandering about the world, all by yourself!"

She was grateful for his raillery. "How young do you think?"

"Let me see. *Hum!* You are only—about—" She laughed mirthfully at his air of preposterous wisdom. "About thirteen—fourteen, yes, you are more than fi-i-ifteen, more than...But take off that enormous hat, little Nonpareil. There's no use guessing in the dark when the moon's shining."

Fran was gleeful. "All right," she cried in one of her childish tones, shrill, fresh, vibratory with the music of innocence.

By this time they had reached the foot-bridge that spanned the deep ravine. Here the wagon-road made its crossing of a tiny stream, by slipping under the foot-bridge, some fifteen feet below. Down there, all was semi-gloom, pungent fragrance of weeds, cooling breath of the half-dried brook, mystery of space between steep banks. But on a level with the bridge, meadow-lands sloped away from the ravine on either hand. On the left lay straggling Littleburg with its four or five hundred houses, faintly twinkling, and beyond the meadows on the right, a fringe of woods started up as if it did not belong there, but had come to be seen, while above the woods swung, the big moon with Fran on the foot-bridge to shine for.

Fran's hat dangled idly in her hand as she drew herself with backward movement upon the railing. The moonlight was full upon her face; so was the young man's gaze. One of her feet found, after leisurely exploration, a down-slanting board upon the edge of which she pressed her heel for support. The other foot swayed to and fro above the flooring, while a little hand on either side of her gripped the top rail.

"Here I am," she said, shaking back rebellious hair.

Abbott Ashton studied her with grave deliberation—it is doubtful if he had ever before so thoroughly enjoyed his duties as usher. He pronounced judicially, "You are older than you look."

"Yes," Fran explained, "my experience accounts for that. I've had lots."

Abbott's lingering here beneath the moon when he should have been hurrying back to the tent, showed how unequally the good things of life—experience, for instance—are divided. "You are sixteen," he hazarded, conscious of a strange exhilaration.

Fran dodged the issue behind a smile—"And I don't think *you* are so *awfully* old."

Abbott was brought to himself with a jolt that threw him hard upon self-consciousness. "I am superintendent of the public school." The very sound of the words rang as a warning, and he became preternaturally solemn.

"Goodness!" cried Fran, considering his grave mouth and thoughtful eyes, "does it hurt *that* bad?"

Abbott smiled. All the same, the position of superintendent must not be bartered away for the transitory pleasures of a foot-bridge. "We had better hurry, if you please," he said gravely.

"I am so afraid of you," murmured Fran. "But I know the meeting will last a long time yet. I'd hate to have to wait long at Mr. Gregory's with that disagreeable lady who isn't Mrs. Gregory."

Abbott was startled. Why did she thus designate Mr. Gregory's secretary? He looked keenly at Fran, but she only said plaintively:

"Can't we stay here?"

He was disturbed and perplexed. It was as if a flitting shadow from some unformed cloud of thought-mist had fallen upon the every-day world out of his subconsciousness. Why did this stranger speak of Miss Grace Noir as the "lady who isn't Mrs. Gregory"? The young man at times had caught himself thinking of her in just that way.

Looking intently at the other as if to divine her secret thoughts, he forgot momentarily his uneasiness. One could not long be troubled by thought-mists from subconsciousness, when looking at Fran, for Fran was a fact. He sighed involuntarily. She was *such* a fact!

Perhaps she wasn't really pretty—but homely? by no means. Her thin face slanted to a sharpened chin. Her hair, drawn to the corner of either eye, left a white triangle whose apex pointed to the highest reach of the forehead. Thus the face, in all its contour, was rising, or falling, to a point. This sharpness of feature was in her verylaugh itself; while in that hair-encircled oval was the light of elfish mockery, but of no human joy.

School superintendents do not enjoy being mystified. "Really," Abbott declared abruptly, "I must go back to the meeting."

Fran had heard enough about his leaving her. She decided to stop that once and for all. "If you go back, I go, too!" she said conclusively. She gave him a look to show that she meant it, then became all humility.

"Please don't be cross with little Nonpareil," she coaxed. "Please don't want to go back to that meeting. Please don't want to leave me. You are so learned and old and so strong—*you* don't care why a little girl laughs."

Fran tilted her head sidewise, and the glance of her eyes proved irresistible. "But tell me about Mr. Gregory," she pleaded, "and don't mind my ways. Ever since mother died, I've found nothing in this world but love that was for somebody else, and trouble that was for me."

The pathetic cadence of the slender-throated tones moved Abbott more than he cared to show.

"If you're in trouble," he exclaimed, "you've sought the right helper in Mr. Gregory. He's the richest man in the county, yet lives so simply, so frugally—they keep few servants—and all because he wants to do good with his money."

"I guess his secretary is considerable help to him," Fran observed.

"I don't know how he'd carry on his great work without her. I think
Mr. Gregory is one of the best men that ever lived."

Fran asked with simplicity, "Great church worker?"

"He's as good as he is rich. He never misses a service. I can't give the time to it that he does—to the church, I mean; I have the ambition to hold, one day, a chair at Yale or Harvard—that means to teach in a university—" he broke off, in explanation.

Fran held out her swinging foot, and examined the dusty shoe. "Oh," she said in a relieved tone, "I was afraid it meant to sit down all the time. Lots of people are ambitious not to move if they can help it."

He looked at her a little uncertainly, then went on: "So it keeps me studying hard, to fit myself for the future. I hope to be reelected superintendent in Littleburg again next year,—this is my first term—there is so much time to study, in Littleburg. After next year, I'll try for something bigger; just keep working my way up and up—"

He had not meant to tell her about himself, but Fran's manner of lifting her head to look at him, as he finished each phrase, had beguiled him to the next. The applause in her eyes warmed his heart.

"You see," said Abbott with a deprecatory smile, "I want to make myself felt in the world."

Fran's eyes shone with an unspoken "Hurrah!" and as he met her gaze, he felt a thrill of pleasure

from the impression that he was what she wanted him to be.

Fran allowed his soul to bathe a while in divine eye-beams of flattering approval, then gave him a little sting to bring him to life. "You are pretty old, not to be married," she remarked. "I hope you won't find some woman to put an end to your high intentions, but men generally do. Men fall in love, and when they finally pull themselves out, they've lost sight of the shore they were headed for."

A slight color stole to Abbott's face. In fact, he was rather hard hit. This wandering child was no doubt a witch. He looked in the direction of the tent, as if to escape the weaving of her magic. But he only said, "That sounds—er—practical."

"Yes," said Fran, wondering who "the woman" was, "if you can't be practical, there's no use to be. Well, I can see you now, at the head of some university—you'll make it, because you're so much like me. Why, when they first began teaching me to feed—Good gracious! What *am* I talking about?" She hurried on, as if to cover her confusion. "But I haven't got as far in books as you have, so I'm not religious."

"Books aren't religion," he remonstrated, then added with unnecessary gentleness, "Little Nonpareil! What an idea!"

"Yes, books are," retorted Fran, shaking back her hair, swinging her foot, and twisting her body impatiently. "That's the only kind of religion I know anything about—just books, just doctrines; what you ought to believe and how you ought to act—all nicely printed and bound between covers. Did you ever meet any religion outside of a book, moving up and down, going about in the open?"

He answered in perfect confidence, "Mr. Gregory lives his religion daily—the kind that helps people, that makes the unfortunate happy."

Fran was not hopeful. "Well, I've come all the way from New York to see him. I hope he can make me happy. I'm certainly unfortunate enough. I've got all the elements he needs to work on."

"From New York!" He considered the delicate form, the youthful face, and whistled. "Will you please tell me where your home is, Nonpareil?"

She waved her arm inclusively. "America. I wish it were concentrated in some spot, but it's just spread out thin under the Stars and Stripes. My country's about all I have." She broke off with a catch in her voice—she tried to laugh, but it was no use.

The high moon which had been obscured by gathering cloud banks, found an opening high above the fringe of woods, and cast a shining glow upon her face, and touched her figure as with silver braid. Out of this light looked Fran's eyes as dark as deepest shadows, and out of the unfathomable depths of her eyes glided two tears as pure as their source in her heart.

Suddenly it came to Abbott Ashton that he understood the language of moon, watching woods, meadow-lands, even the gathering rain-clouds; all spoke of the universal brotherhood of man with nature; a brotherhood including the most ambitious superintendent of schools and a homeless Nonpareil; a brotherhood to be confirmed by the clasping of sincere hands. There was danger in such a confirmation, for it carried Abbott beyond the limits that mark a superintendent's confines.

As he stood on the bridge, holding Fran's hand in a warm and sympathetic pressure, he was not unlike one on picket-service who slips over the trenches to hold friendly parley with the enemy. Abbott did not know there was any danger in this brotherly handclasp; but that was because he could not see a fleshy and elderly lady slowly coming down the hill. As superintendent, he should doubtless have considered his responsibilities to the public; he did consider them when the lady, breathless and severe, approached the bridge, while every pound of her ample form cast its weight upon the seal of her disapproving, low-voiced and significant, "Good evening, *Professor* Ashton."

Fran whistled.

The lady heard, but she swept on without once glancing back. There was in her none of that saline tendency that made of Lot a widower; the lady desired to see no more.

Fran opened her eyes at Abbott to their widest extent, as she demurely asked, "How cold is it? My thermometer is frozen."

The young man did not betray uneasiness, though he was really alarmed, for his knowledge of the fleshy lady enabled him to foresee gathering clouds more sinister than those overhead. The obvious thing to be done was to release the slender hand; he did so rather hastily.

"Have I got you into trouble?" Fran asked, with her elfish laugh. "If so, we'll be neighbors, for that's where I live. Who was she?"

"Miss Sapphira Clinton," he answered as, by a common impulse, they began walking toward Hamilton Gregory's house. "Bob Clinton's sister, and my landlady." The more Abbott thought of his adventure, the darker it grew; before they, reached their destination, it had become a deep gray.

"Do you mean the 'Brother Clinton' that couldn't get 'through'?"

"Yes....He's the chairman of the School Board."

"Ah!" murmured Fran comprehendingly. At Gregory's gate, she said, "Now you run back to the tent and I'll beard the lion by myself. I know it has sharp teeth, but I guess it won't bite me. Do try to get back to the tent before the meeting's over. Show yourself there. Parade up and down the aisles."

He laughed heartily, all the sorrier for her because he found himself in trouble.

"It was fun while it lasted, wasn't it!" Fran exclaimed, with a sudden gurgle.

"Part of it was," he admitted. "Good-by, then, little Nonpareil."

He held out his hand.

"No, sir!" cried Fran, clasping her hands behind her. "That's what got you into trouble. Good-by. Run for it!"

CHAPTER IV

THE WOMAN WHO WAS NOT MRS. GREGORY

Hardly had Abbott Ashton disappeared down the village vista of moonlight and shadow-patches, before Fran's mood changed. Instead of seeking to carry out her threat of bearding the lion in the den, she sank down on the porch-steps, gathered her knees in her arms, and stared straight before her.

She made a woebegone little figure with her dusty shoes, her black stockings, her huddled body, while the big hat threw all into deepest gloom. From hat to drawn-in feet, she was not unlike a narrow edge of darkness splitting the moon-sheen, a somber shadow cast by goodness- knows-what and threatening goodness-knows-whom.

Though of skilful resources, of impregnable resolution, Fran could be despondent to the bluest degree; and though competent at the clash, she often found herself purpling on the eve of the crisis. The moment had come to test her fighting qualities, yet she drooped despondently.

Hamilton Gregory was coming through the gate. As he halted in surprise, the black shadow rose slowly, wearily. He, little dreaming that he was confronted by a shadow from the past, saw in her only the girl who had been publicly expelled from the tent.

The choir-leader had expected his home-coming to be crowned by a vision very different. He came up the walk slowly, not knowing what to say. She waited, outwardly calm, inwardly gathering power. White-hot action from Fran, when the iron was to be welded. Out of the deepening shadows her will leaped keen as a blade.

She addressed him, "Good evening, Mr. Gregory."

He halted. When he spoke, his tone expressed not only a general disapproval of all girls who wander away from their homes in the night, but an especial repugnance to one who could laugh during religious services. "Do you want to speak to me, child?"

"Yes." The word was almost a whisper. The sound of his voice had weakened her.

"What do you want?" He stepped up on the porch. The moon had vanished behind the rising masses of storm-clouds, not to appear again, but the light through the glass door revealed his poetic features. Flashes of lightning as yet faint but rapid in recurrence, showed his beauty as that of a young man. Fran remained silent, moved more than she could have thought possible. He stared intently, but under that preposterous hat, she was practically invisible, save as a black shadow. He asked again, with growing impatience, "What do you want?"

His unfriendliness gave her the spur she needed. "I want a home," she said decidedly.

Hamilton Gregory was seriously disturbed. However evil-disposed, the waif should not be left to wander aimlessly about the streets. Of the three hotels in Littleburg, the cheapest was not overly particular. He would take her there. "Do you mean to tell me," he temporized, "that you are absolutely alone?"

Fran's tone was a little hard, not because she felt bitter, but lest she betray too great feeling, "Absolutely alone in the world."

He was sorry for her; at the same time he was subject to the reaction of his exhausting labors as song-leader. "Then," he said, with tired resignation, "if you'll follow me, I'll take you where you can spend the night, and to-morrow, I'll try to find you work."

"Work!" She laughed. "Oh, *thank* you!" Her accent was that of repudiation. Work, indeed!

He drew back in surprise and displeasure.

"You didn't understand me," she resumed. "What I want is a home. I don't want to follow you anywhere. *This* is where I want to stay."

"You can not stay here," he answered with a slight smile at the presumptuous request, "but I'm willing to pay for a room at the hotel—"

At this moment, the door was opened by the young woman who, some hours earlier, had responded to Fran's knocking. Footsteps upon the porch had told of Gregory's return.

The lady who was not Mrs. Gregory, was so pleased to see the gentleman who was Mr. Gregory—they had not met since the evening meal—that, at first, she was unaware of the black shadow; and Mr. Gregory, in spite of his perplexity, forgot the shadow also, so cheered was he by the glimpse of his secretary as she stood in the brightly lighted hall. Such moments of delighted recognition are infinitesimal when a third person, however shadowy, is present; yet had the world been there, this exchange of glances must have taken place.

Fran did not understand—her very wisdom blinded her as with too great light. She had seen so much of the world that, on finding a tree bearing apples, she at once classified it as an apple tree. To Gregory, Grace Noir was but a charming and conscientious sympathizer in his life-work, the atmosphere in which he breathed freest. He had not breathed freely for half a dozen hours—no wonder he was glad to see her. To Grace Noir, Hamilton Gregory was but a benefactor to mankind, a man of lofty ideals whom it was a privilege to aid, and since she knew that her very eyes gave him strength, no wonder she was glad to see him.

Could Fran have read their thoughts, she would not have found the slightest consciousness of any shade of evil in their sympathetic comradeship. As she could read only their faces, she disliked more than ever the tall, young, and splendidly formed secretary.

"Oh!" said Grace with restraint, discovering Fran.

"Yes," Fran said with her elfish smile, "back again."

Just without the portal, Hamilton Gregory paused irresolutely. He did not know what course to pursue, so he repeated vacantly, "I am willing to pay—"

Fran interrupted flippantly: "I have all the money *I* want." Then she passed swiftly into the hall, rudely brushing past the secretary.

Gregory could only follow. He spoke to Grace in a low voice, telling all he knew of the night wanderer. Her attitude called for explanations, but he would have given them anyway, in that low confidential murmur. He did not know why it was—or seek to know— butwhenever he spoke to Grace, it was natural to use a low tone, as if modulating his touch to sensitive strings—as if the harmony resulting from the interplay of their souls called for the soft pedal.

"What is to be done?" Grace inquired. Her attitude of reserve toward Gregory which Fran's presence had inspired, melted to potential helpfulness; at the same time, her dislike for the girl solidified. That Fran should have laughed aloud in the tent, removed her from the secretary's understanding. But the worst indictment had been pronounced against her by her own shameless tongue. That one so young, without a home, without fear of the dark streets, should have all the money she wants….

"What do you advise?" Gregory asked his secretary gently.

Grace cast a disdainful look at Fran. Then she turned to her employer and her deliciously curved face changed most charmingly. "I think," she responded with a faint shake of rebuke for his leniency, "that you should not need my advice in this matter." She had occasionally feared that his irresolution at moments calling for important decisions hinted at weakness. Why should he stand apparently helpless before this small bundle of arrogant impudence?

Gregory turned upon Fran with affected harshness. "You must go." He was annoyed that Grace should imagine him weak.

Fran's face hardened. It became an ax of stone, sharpened at each end, with eyes, nose, and mouth in a narrow line of cold defiance. To Grace, the acute wedge of white forehead, gleaming its way to the roots of the black hair, and the sharp chin cutting its way down from the tightly drawn mouth, spoke only of cunning. She regarded Fran as a fox, brought to bay.

Fran spoke with calm deliberation: "I am not going away."

"I would advise you," said Grace, looking down at her from under drooping lids, "to go at once, for a storm is rising. Do you want to be caught in the rain?"

Fran looked up at Grace, undaunted. "I want to speak to Mr. Gregory. If you are the manager of this house, he and I can go outdoors. I don't mind getting wet. I've been in all kinds of weather."

Grace looked at Gregory, Her silences were effective weapons.

"I have no secrets from this lady," he said, looking into Grace's eyes, answering her silence. "What do you want to say to me, child?"

Fran shrugged her shoulders, always looking at Grace, while neither of the others looked at her. "Very well, then, of course it doesn't matter to me, but I thought it might to Mr. Gregory. Since he hasn't any secrets from you, of course he has told you that one of nearly twenty years ago—"

It was not the rumble of distant thunder, but a strange exclamation from the man that interrupted her; it was some such cry as human creatures may have uttered before the crystallizing of recurring experiences into the terms of speech.

Fran gave quick, relentless blows: "Of course he has told you all about his Springfield life—"

"Silence!" shouted Gregory, quivering from head to foot. The word was like an imprecation, and for a time it kept hissing between his locked teeth.

"And of course," Fran continued, tilting up her chin as if to drive in the words, "since you know all of his secrets—*all* of them—you have naturally been told the most important one. And so you know that when he was boarding with his cousin in Springfield and attending the college there, something like twenty years ago—"

"Leave us!" Gregory cried, waving a violent arm at his secretary, as if to sweep her beyond the possibility of overhearing another word.

"Leave you—with *her*?" Grace stammered, too amazed by his attitude to feel offended.

"Yes, yes, yes! Go at once!" He seemed the victim of some mysterious terror.

Grace compressed her full lips till they were thinned to a white line.
"Do you mean for ever?"

"Oh, Grace—I beg your pardon—Miss Grace—I don't mean that, of course. What could I do without you? Nothing, nothing, Grace—you are the soul of my work. Don't look at me so cruelly."

"Then you just mean," Grace said steadily, "for me to go away for a little while?"

"Only half an hour; that's all. Only half an hour, and then come back to me, and I will explain."

"You needn't go at all, on my account," observed Fran, with a twist of her mouth. "It's nothing to me whether you go or stay."

"She has learned a secret," Gregory stammered, "that vitally affects— affects some people—some friends of mine. I must talk to her about— about that secret, just for a little while. Half an hour, Miss Grace, that is all. That is really all—then come back to me. You understand that it's on account of the secret that I ask you to leave us. You understand that I would never send you away from me if I had my way, don't you, Grace?"

"I understand that you want me to go *now*," Grace Noir replied, unresponsive. She ascended the stairway, at each step seeming to mount that much the higher into an atmosphere of righteous remoteness.

No one who separated Gregory from his secretary could enjoy his toleration, but Fran had struck far below the surface of likings and dislikings. She had turned back the covering of conventionality to lay bare the quivering heartstrings of life itself. There was no time to hesitate. The stone ax which on other occasions might be a laughing elfish face was now held ready for battle.

"Hadn't we better go in a room where we can talk privately?" Fran asked. "I don't like this hall. That woman would just as soon listen over the banisters as not. I've seen lots of people like her, and I understand her kind."

CHAPTER V

WE REAP WHAT WE SOW

If anything could have prejudiced Hamilton Gregory against Fran's interests it would have been her slighting allusion to the one who typified his most exalted ideals as "that woman". But Fran was to him nothing but an agent bringing out of the past a secret he had preserved for almost twenty years. This stranger knew of his youthful folly, and she must be prevented from communicating it to others. It was from no sense of aroused conscience that he hastened to lead her to the front room. In this crisis, something other than shuddering recoil from haunting deeds was imperative; unlovely specters must be made to vanish.

How much did this girl know? And how could her silence be purchased? His conscience was seldom asleep; but coals of remorse are endurable, however galling, if the winds of publicity do not threaten to fan them to a blaze.

He tried desperately to cover his dread under a voice of harshness:
"What have you to say to me?"

Fran had lost the insolent composure which the secretary had inspired. Now that she was alone with Hamilton Gregory, it seemed impossible to speak. She clasped and unclasped her hands. She opened her mouth, but her lips were dry. The wind had risen, and as it went moaning past the window, it seemed to speak of the yearning of years passing in the night, unsatisfied. At last came the words muffled, frightened—"I know all about it."

"All about what, child?" He had lost his harshness. His voice was almost coaxing, as if entreating the mercy of ignorance.

Fran gasped, "I know all about it—I know—" She was terrified by the thought that perhaps she would not be able to tell him. Her head grew light; she seemed floating away into dark space, as if drawn by the fleeing wind, while the man before her was magnified. She leaned heavily upon a table with hand turned backward, whitening her fingertips by the weight thrown on them.

"About what?" he repeated with the caution of one who fears. He could not doubt the genuineness of her emotion; but he would not accept her statement of its cause until he must.

"Oh," cried Fran, catching a tempestuous breath, uneven, violent, "you know what I mean—*that!*"

The dew glistened on his brow, but he doggedly stood on the defensive.
"You are indefinite," he muttered, trying to appear bold.

She knew he did not understand because he would not, and now she realized that he would, if possible, deny. His bearing suggested something so foreign to her own nature, that it gave her strength. She had been afraid to witness the emotion her knowledge might excite, but all he revealed was a determination to avoid the issue.

Pretense and sham always hardened her. "Then," she said slowly, "I will be definite. I will tell you the things it would have been better for you to tell me. Your early home was in New York, but you had a cousin living in Springfield, where there was a very good college. Your parents were anxious to get you away from the temptations of a big city until you were of age. So you were sent to live with your cousin and attend college. You were with him three or four years, and at last the time came for graduation. Shall I go on?"

He fought desperately for self-preservation. "What is there in all this?"

"You had married, in the meantime," Fran said coldly; "married secretly. That was about nineteen years ago. She was only about eighteen. After graduation, you were to go to New York, break the news to your father, come back to Springfield for your wife, and acknowledge her. You graduated; you went to your father. Did you come back?"

"My God!" groaned the man. So she knew everything; must he admit it? "What is all this to you?" he burst forth. "Who and what are you, anyway—and why do you come here with your story? If it were true —"

"True!" said Fran bitterly. "If you've forgotten, why not go to Springfield and ask the first old citizen you meet? Or you might write to some one you used to know, and inquire. If you prefer, I'll send for one of your old professors, and pay his expenses. They took a good deal of interest in the young college student who married and neglected Josephine Derry. They haven't forgotten it, if you have."

"You don't know," he gasped, "that there's a penalty for coming to people's houses to threaten them with supposed facts in their lives. You don't know that the jails are ready to punish blackmailing, for you are only a little girl and don't understand such things. I give you warning. Although you are in short dresses—"

"Yes," remarked Fran dryly, "I thought that would be an advantage to you. It ought to make things easier."

"How an advantage to me? Easier? What have I to do with you?"

"I thought," Fran said coolly, "that it would be easier for you to take me into the house as a little girl than as a grown woman. You'll remember I told you I've come here to stay."

"To stay!" he echoed, shrinking back. "*You?*"

"Yes," she said, all the cooler for his attitude of repulsion. "I want a home. Yes, I'm going to stay. I want to belong to somebody."

He cried out desperately, "But what am I to do? This will ruin me—oh, it's true, all you've said—I don't deny it. But I tell you, girl, you will ruin me. Is all the work of my life to be overturned? I shall go mad."

"No, you won't," Fran calmly assured him.

[Illustration with caption: "I want to belong to somebody"]

"You'll do what every one has to do, sooner or later—face the situation. You're a little late getting to it, but it was coming all the time. You can let me live here as an adopted orphan, or any way you please. The important fact to me is that I'm going to live here. But I don't want to make it hard for you, truly I don't."

"Don't you?" He spoke not loudly, but with tremendous pressure of desire. "Then, for God's sake, go back! Go back to—to wherever, you came from. I'll pay all expenses. You shall have all you want—"

"All I want," Fran responded, "is a home, and that's something people can't buy. Get used to the thought of my staying here; that will make it easy."

"Easy!" he ejaculated. "Then it's your purpose to compel me to give you shelter because of this secret —you mean to ruin me. I'll not be able to account for you, and they will question—my wife will want to

know, and—and others as well."

"Now, now," said Fran, with sudden gentleness, "don't be so excited, don't take it so hard. Let them question. I'll know how to keep from exposing you. But I do want to belong to somebody, and after I've been here a while, and you begin to like me, I'll tell you everything. I knew the Josephine Derry that you deserted—she raised me, and I know she loved you to the end. Didn't you ever care for her, not even at the first, when you got her to keep your marriage secret until you could speak to your father face to face? You must have loved her then. And she's the best friend I ever had. Since she died I've wandered — and—and I want a home."

The long loneliness of years found expression in her eager voice and pleading eyes, but he was too engrossed with his own misfortunes to heed her emotion. "Didn't I go back to Springfield?" he cried out. "Of course I did. I made inquiries for her; that's why I went back—to find out what had become of her. I'd been gone only three years, yes, only three years—but, good heavens, how I had suffered! I was so changed that nobody knew me." He paused, appalled at the recollection. "I have always had a terrible capacity for suffering. I tell you, it was my duty to go back to find her, and I went back. I would have acknowledged her as my wife. I would have lived with her. I'd have done right by her, though it had killed me. Can I say more than that?"

"I am glad you went back,' said Fran softly. "She never knew it. I am so glad that you did—even that."

"Yes, I did go back," he said, more firmly. "But she was gone. I tell you all this because you say she was your best friend."

"A while ago you asked me who I am—and what—"

"It doesn't matter," he interjected. "You were her friend; that is all I care to know. I went back to Springfield, after three years—but she was gone. I was told that her uncle had cast her off, and she had disappeared. It seems that she'd made friends with a class of people who were not—who were not—respectable."

Fran's eyes shone brightly. "Oh, they were not," she agreed, "they were not at all what you would call respectable. They were not religious."

"So I was told," he resumed, a little uncertainly. "There was no way for me to find her."

"Her?" cried Fran, "you keep saying *'her'.* Do you mean—?"

He hesitated. "She had chosen her part—to live with those people—I left her to lead the life that pleased her. That's why I never went back to Springfield again. I've taken up my life in my own way, and left her—your friend—"

"Yes, call her that," cried Fran, holding up her head. "I am proud of that title. I glory in it. And in this house—"

"I have made my offer," he interrupted decidedly. "I'll provide for you anywhere but in this house."

Fran regarded him with somber intensity. "I've asked for a home with you on the grounds that your wife was my best friend in all the world, and because I am homeless. You refuse. I suppose that's natural. I have to guess at your feelings because I haven't been raised among 'respectable' people. I'm sorry you don't like it, but you're going to provide for me right here. For a girl, I'm pretty independent; folks that don't like me are welcome to all the enjoyment they get out of their dislike. I'm here to stay. Suppose you look on me as a sort of summer crop. I enjoyed hearing you. sing, to-night—

"'We reap what we sow,
We reap what we sow'—

I see you remember."

He shuddered at her mocking holy things. "Hush! What are you saying? The past is cut off from my life. I have been pardoned, and I will not have anybody forcing that past upon me."

Her words came bitingly: "You can't help it. You sowed. You can't pardon a seed from growing."

"I can help it, and I will. The past is no more mine than hers—our marriage was legal, but it bound me no more than it bound her. She chose her own companions. I have been building up a respectable life, here in Littleburg. You shall not overturn the labor of the last ten years. You can go. My will is unalterable. Go—and do what you can!"

Instead of anger, Fran showed sorrow: "How long have you been married to the second Mrs. Gregory

—the present one?"

He turned his back upon her as if to go to the door, but he wheeled about: "Ten years. You understand? Ten years of the best work of my life that you want to destroy."

"Poor lady!" murmured Fran. "The first Mrs. Gregory—my *'friend'*— has been dead only three years. You and she were never divorced. The lady that you call Mrs. Gregory now,—she isn't your wife, is she?"

"I thought—" he was suddenly ashen pale—"but I thought that *she*—I believed her dead long ago—I was sure of it—positive. What you say is impossible—"

"But no one can sow without reaping," Fran said, still pityingly. "When you sang those words, it was only a song to you, but music is just a bit of life's embroidery, while you think it life itself. You don't sow, or reap in a choir loft. You can't sow deeds and reap words."

"I understand you, now," he faltered. "You have come to disgrace me. What good will that do you, or —or my first wife? You are no abstraction, to represent sowing or reaping, but a flesh-and-blood girl who can go away if she chooses—"

"She chooses to stay," Fran assured him.

"Then you have resolved to ruin me and break my wife's heart! "The sweet uncomplaining face of the second Mrs. Gregory rose before him. And Grace Noir—what would *she* think?

"No, I'm just here to have a home."

"Will you enjoy a home that you seize by force?"

"Don't they say that the Kingdom of God may be taken by force? But you know more about the Kingdom than I. Let them believe me the daughter of some old boyhood friend—that'll make it easy. As the daughter of that friend, you'll give me a home. I'll keep out of your way, and be pleasant—a nice little girl, of any age you please." She smiled remotely.

He spoke dully: "But they'll want to know all about that old college friend."

"Naturally. Well, just invent some story—I'll stand by you."

"You do not know me," he returned, drawing himself up. "What! do you imagine I would lie to them?"

"I think," Fran remarked impersonally, "that to a person in your position—a person beginning to reap what he has sown, lying is always the next course. But you must act as your conscience dictates. You may be sure that if you decide to tell the truth, I'll certainly stand by you in that."

Helplessly driven to bay, he flashed out violently, "Unnatural girl— or woman—or whatever you are— there is no spirit of girlhood or womanhood in you."

Fran returned in a low concentrated voice, "If I'm unnatural, what were you in the Springfield days? Was it natural for you to be married secretly when the marriage might have been public? When you went away to break the news to your father, wasn't it rather unnatural for you to hide three years before coming back? When you came back and heard that your wife had gone away to be supported by people who were not respectable, was it natural for you to be satisfied with the first rumors you heard, and disappear for good and all?

"As for me, yes, I have neither the spirit of girlhood nor womanhood, for I'm neither a girl, nor a woman, I'm nothing." Her voice trembled." Don't rouse my anger—when I lose grip on myself, I'm pretty hard to stop. If I let everything rush on my mind—how she—my *'friend'*—my sweet darling 'friend'—how she searched for you all the years till she died—and how even on her death-bed she thought maybe you'd come—you—"

Fran choked back the words. "Don't!" she gasped. "Don't reproach me, or I'll reproach you, and I mustn't do that. I want to hide my real heart from you—from all the world. I want to smile, and be like respectable people."

"For God's sake," whispered the other frantically, "hush! I hear my wife coming. Yes, yes, I'll do everything you say, but, oh, don't ruin me. You shall have a home with us, you shall have everything, everything."

"Except a welcome," Fran faltered, frightened at the emotion she had betrayed. "Can you show me to a room—quick—before your wife comes? I don't want to meet her, now, I'm terribly tired. I've come all

the way from New York to find you; I reached Littleburg only at dusk—and I've been pretty busy ever since!"

"Come, then," he said hastily. "This way—I'll show you a room.... It's too late," he broke off, striving desperately to regain composure.

The door opened, and a woman entered the room hastily.

CHAPTER VI

MRS. GREGORY

The wind had suddenly increased in violence, and a few raindrops had already fallen. Apprehensions of a storm caused hurried movements throughout the house. Blinding flashes of lightning suggested a gathering of the family in the reception-hall, where, according to tradition, there was "less danger"; and as the unknown lady opened the door of the front room, Fran heard footsteps upon the stairs, and caught a glimpse of Grace Noir descending.

The lady closed the door behind her before she perceived Fran, so intent was she upon securing from threatening rain some unfinished silk-work lying on the window-sill. She paused abruptly, her honest brown eyes opened wide.

Fran regarded her with that elfish smile which, to the secretary, had suggested a fox. It was the coolest little smile, slyly playing upon her twisted mouth.

The perspiration shone on Hamilton Gregory's forehead. "Just a moment," he uttered incoherently —"wait—I'll be back when I make sure my library window's closed...." He left the room, his brain in an agony of indecision. How much must be told? And how would they regard him after the telling?

"Who are you?" asked the lady of thirty-five, mildly, but with gathering wonder.

The answer came, with a broken laugh, "I am Fran." It was spoken a little defiantly, a little menacingly, as if the tired spirit was bracing itself for battle.

The lady wore her wavy hair parted in the middle after that fashion which perhaps was never new; and no impudent ribbon or arrogant flounce stole one's attention from the mouth that was just sincere and sweet. It was a face one wanted to look at because—well, Fran didn't know why. "She's no prettier than I," was Fran's decision, measuring from the natural standard—the standard every woman hides in her own breast. The nose was too slight, but it seemed cut to Fran's liking.

Fran smiled in a different way—a smile that did not instantaneously flash, but darted out of the corner of her eye, and slipped along the slightly parted lips, as if afraid of being caught, and vanished, leaving a wistful face.

"And who is Fran?" asked the mild voice. The lady smiled so tenderly, it was like a mellow light stealing from a fairy rose-garden of thornless souls.

Fran caught her breath while her face showed hardness—but not against the other. She felt something like holy wrath as her presentment sounded forth protestingly—"But who are *you?*"

"I am Mrs. Gregory."

"Oh, no," cried Fran, with violence, "no!" She added rather wildly,
"It can't be—I mean—but say you are not Mrs. Gregory."

"I am Mrs. Gregory," the other repeated, mystified.

Fran tried to hide her emotion with a smile, but it would have been easier for her to cry, just because she of the patient brown eyes was Mrs. Gregory.

At that moment Hamilton Gregory reentered the room, brought back by the fear that Fran might tell all during his absence. How different life would have been if he could have found her flown!—but he read in her face no promise of departure.

His wife was not surprised at his haggard face, for he was always working too hard, worrying over his extensive charities, planning editorials for his philanthropic journal, devising means to better the condition of the local church. But the presence of this stranger— doubtless one of his countless objects of charity—demanded explanation.

He loathed the necessity that confronted him, above all the uncertainty of his situation. Hitherto the mistakes of his life had passed over his head without dangerous explosions; he had gone away from them, and they had seemed, somehow, to right themselves.

"Come," he said bruskly, addressing neither directly, "we needn't stop here. I have some explanations to make, and they might as well be made before everybody, once and for all..." He paused wretchedly, seeing no outlook, no possible escape. Something must be told—not a lie, but possibly not all the truth; that would rest with Fran. He was as much in her power as if she, herself, had been the effect of his sin.

He opened the door, and walked with heavy step into the hall. Mrs. Gregory followed, wondering, looking rather at Fran than at her husband. Fran's keen eyes searched the apartment for the actual source of Hamilton Gregory's acutest regrets.

Yes, there stood the secretary.

CHAPTER VII

A FAMILY CONFERENCE

With the coming of the rain, the peals of thunder had grown less violent, and the wind had fallen; but those who had sought the reception room for safety found in Fran's presence something as startling, and as incomprehensible, as the most vivid lightning.

Of the group, it was the secretary who first claimed Fran's attention. In a way, Grace Noir dominated the place. Perhaps it was because of her splendidly developed body, her beauty, her attitude of unclaimed yet recognized authority, that she stood distinctly first.

As for Mrs. Gregory, her mild aloofness suggested that she hardly belonged to the family. Hamilton Gregory found himself instinctively turning to Grace, rather than to his wife. Mrs. Gregory's face did, indeed, ask why Fran was there; but Grace, standing at the foot of the stairs, and looking at Gregory with memory of her recent dismissal, demanded explanations.

Mrs. Gregory's mother, confined by paralysis to a wheel-chair, fastened upon the new-comer eyes whose brightness seventy years or more had not dimmed. The group was completed by Mrs. Gregory's bachelor brother, older than his sister by fifteen years. This brother, Simon Jefferson, though stockily built and evidently well- fed, wore an air of lassitude, as if perennially tired. As he leaned back in a hall chair, he seemed the only one present who did not care why Fran was there.

Gregory broke the silence by clearing his throat with evident embarrassment. A peal of thunder offered him reprieve, and after its reverberations had died away, he still hesitated. "This," he said presently, "is a—the orphan—an orphan—one who has come to me from— She says her name is Frances."

"Fran," came the abrupt correction; "just Fran."

There was a general feeling that an orphan should speak less positively, even about her own name—should be, as it were, subdued from the mere fact of orphanhood.

"An orphan!" Simon Jefferson ejaculated, moving restlessly in his effort to find the easiest corner of

his chair. "I hope nothing is going to excite me. I have heart-disease, little girl, and I'm liable to topple off at any moment. I tell you, I must *not* be excited."

"I don't think," replied Fran, with cheerful interest in his malady, "that orphans are very exciting."

Hamilton Gregory resumed, cautiously stepping over dangerous ground, while the others looked at Fran, and Grace never ceased to look at him. "She came here to-night, after the services at the Big Tent. She came here and, or I should say, to request, to ask—Miss Grace saw her when she came. Miss Grace knew of her being here." He seized upon this fact as if to lift himself over pitfalls.

Grace's eyes were gravely judicial. She would not condemn him unheard, but at the same time she let him see that her knowledge of Fran would not help his case. It did not surprise Mrs. Gregory that Grace had known of the strange presence; the secretary usually knew of events before the rest of the family.

Gregory continued, delicately picking his way: "But the child asked to see me alone, because she had a special message—a—yes, a message to deliver to me. So I asked Miss Grace to leave us for half an hour. Then I heard the girl's story, while Miss Grace waited up-stairs."

"Well," Simon Jefferson interposed irritably, "Miss Grace is accounted for. Go on, brother-in-law, go on, if we must have it."

"The fact is, Lucy—" Gregory at this point turned to his wife—for at certain odd moments he found real relief in doing so—"the fact is— the fact is, this girl is the—er—daughter of—of a very old friend of mine—a friend who was—was a friend years ago, long before I moved to Littleburg, long before I saw you, Lucy. That was when my home was in New York. I have told you all about that time of my youth, when I lived with my father in New York. Well, before my father died, I was acquainted with—this friend. I owed that person a great debt, not of money—a debt of—what shall I say?"

Fran suggested, "Honor."

Gregory mopped his brow while all looked from Fran to him. He resumed desperately: "I owed a great debt to that friend—oh, not of money, of course—a debt which circumstances prevented me from paying—from meeting—which I still owe to the memory of that—er—of that dead friend. The friend is dead, you understand, yes, dead."

Mrs. Gregory could not understand her husband's unaccustomed hesitancy. She inquired of Fran, "And is your mother dead, too, little girl?"

That simple question, innocently preferred, directed the course of future events. Mr. Gregory had not intentionally spoken of his friend in such a way as to throw doubt upon the sex. Now that he realized how his wife's misunderstanding might save him, he had not the courage to undeceive her.

Fran waited for him to speak. The delay had lost him the power to reveal the truth. Would Fran betray him? He wished that the thunder might drown out the sound of her words, but the storm seemed holding its breath to listen.

Fran said quietly, "My mother died three years ago."

Mrs. Gregory asked her husband, "Did you ever tell me about this friend? I'd remember from his name; what was it?"

It seemed impossible for him to utter the name which had sounded from his lips so often in love. He opened his lips, but he could not say "Josephine". Besides, the last name would do.

"Derry," he gasped.

"Come here, Fran Derry," said Mrs. Gregory, reaching out her hand, with that sweet smile that somehow made Fran feel the dew of tears.

Hamilton Gregory plucked up spirits. "I couldn't turn away the daughter of my old friend. You wouldn't want me to do that. None of you would. Now that I've explained everything, I hope there'll be no objection to her staying here in the house—that is, if she wants to stay. She has come to do it, she says—all the way from New York."

Mrs. Gregory slipped her arm about the independent shoulders, and drew the girl down beside her upon a divan. "Do you know," she said gently, "you are the very first of all his New York friends who has come into my life? Indeed, I am willing, and indeed you *shall* stay with us, just as long as you will."

Fran asked impulsively, as she clasped her hands, "Do you think you could like me? Could—you?"

"Dear child"—the answer was accompanied by a gentle pressure, "you are the daughter of my husband's friend. That's enough for me. You need a home, and you shall have one with us. I like you already, dear."

Tears dimmed Fran's eyes. "And I just love you," she cried. "My! What a woman you are!"

Grace Noir was silent. She liked Fran less than ever, but her look was that of a hired secretary, saying, "With all this, I have nothing to do." Doubtless, when alone with Hamilton Gregory, she would express her sincere conviction that the girl's presence would interfere with his work—but these others would not understand. They dwelt entirely apart from her employer's philanthropic enterprises, they did not sympathize with his religious activities, or even read his weekly magazine. Nobody understood him as she did.

Fran's unconventionality had given to Mrs. Gregory's laugh a girlish note, but almost at once her face resumed its wonted gravity. Perhaps the slight hollows in the cheeks had been pressed by the fingers of care, but it was rather lack of light than presence of shadow, that told Fran something was missing from the woman-heart.

In the meantime old Mrs. Jefferson had been looking on with absorbed attention, desperately seeking to triumph over her enemy, a deaf demon that for years had taken possession of her. Now, with an impatient hand, she sent her wheel-chair to her daughter's side and proffered her ear-trumpet.

"Mother," Mrs. Gregory called through this ebony connector of souls, "this is Fran Derry, the daughter of Mr. Gregory's dear friend, one he used to know in New York, many years before he came to Littleburg. Fran is an orphan, and needs a home. We have asked her to live with us."

Mrs. Jefferson did not always hear aright, but she always responded with as much spirit as if her hearing were never in doubt. "And what *I'd* like to know," she cried, "is what you are asking her to give *us*."

Grace Noir came forward with quiet resolution. "Let me speak to your mother," she said to Mrs. Gregory.

Mrs. Gregory handed her the tube, somewhat surprised, since Grace made it a point of conscience seldom to talk to the old lady. When Grace Noir disapproved of any one, she did not think it right to conceal that fact. Since Mrs. Jefferson absolutely refused to attend religious services, alleging as excuse that she could not hear the sermon, refusing to offer up the sacrifice of her fleshly presence as an example to others,—Grace disapproved most heartily.

Mrs. Jefferson held her head to the trumpet shrinkingly, as if afraid of getting her ear tickled.

Grace spoke quietly, but distinctly, as she indicated Fran—"You know how hard it is to get a good servant in Littleburg." Then she returned the trumpet. That was all she had to say.

Fran looked at Mr. Gregory.

He bit his lip, hoping it might go at that.

The old lady was greatly at sea. Much as she disliked the secretary, her news was grateful. "Be sure to stipulate," she said briskly, "about wheeling me around in the garden. The last one wasn't told in the beginning, and had to be paid extra, every time I took the air. There's nothing like an understanding at the beginning."

"I'd like a beginning of my sleep," Simon Jefferson announced. "The thunder and lightning's stopped, and the sound of this rain is just what I need, if the house will get quiet." He rose, gnawing his grizzled beard with impatience.

Fran walked up to Grace Noir and shook back her hair in the way that Grace particularly disliked. She said: "Nothing like an understanding at the beginning; yes, the old lady's right. Good thing to know what the trouble is, so we'll know how it'll hit us. I guess I'm the trouble for this house, but I'm going to hit it as the daughter of an old friend, and not as a servant. I'm just about as independent as Patrick Henry, Miss Noir. I'm not responsible for being born, but it's my outlook to hold on to my equality."

"Fran!" exclaimed Mrs. Gregory, in mild reproof.

Grace looked at Mr. Gregory and nothing could have exceeded the saintliness of her expression. Insulted, she was enjoying to the full her pious satisfaction of martyrdom.

"Dear Mrs. Gregory," said Fran kindly, "I'm sorry to have to do this, but it isn't as if you were

adopting a penniless orphan. I'm adopting a home. I want to belong to somebody, and I want people to feel that they have something when they have me."

"I reckon they'll know they've got something," remarked Simon Jefferson, shooting a dissatisfied glance at Fran from under bushy brows.

Fran laughed outright. "I'm going to like *you*, all right," she declared. "You are so human."

It is exceedingly difficult to maintain satisfaction in silent martyrdom. Grace was obliged to speak, lest any one think that she acquiesced in evil. "Is it customary for little girls to roam the streets at night, wandering about the world alone, adopting homes according to their whims?"

"I really don't think it customary," Fran replied politely, "but I'm not a customary girl." At that moment she caught the old lady's eye. It was sparkling with eloquent satisfaction; Mrs. Jefferson supposed terms of service were under discussion. Fran laughed, grabbed the ear- trumpet and called, "Hello. How are you?"

When an unknown voice entered the large end of the tube, half its meaning was usually strained away before the rest reached the yearning ear. Mrs. Jefferson responded eagerly, "And will you wheel me around the garden at least twice a day?"

Fran patted the thin old arm with her thin young hand, as she shouted,
"I'll wheel you twenty times a day, if you say so!"

"But I do *not* see-saw," retorted the old lady with spirit.

"This is going to agitate my heart," interposed Simon Jefferson, as there came a louder dash of rain against the windows. "I ought to be getting the benefits of this soothing sound, in my bed. When is this company going to break up?"

Gregory, finding Grace's eyes fixed on him searchingly, felt himself pushed to the wall. "Of course," he said coldly, "it is understood that the daughter of—er—my friend, comes here as a—as an equal." As he found himself forced into definite opposition to his secretary, his manner grew more assured. Suddenly it occurred to him that he was, in a way, atoning for the past.

"As an equal, yes!" exclaimed his wife, again embracing Fran. "How else could it be?"

"This is going to be a good thing for you, if you only knew it," Fran said, looking into her face with loving eyes.

Hamilton Gregory was almost able to persuade himself that he had received the orphan of his own free choice, thus to make reparation. "It is my duty," he said; "and I always try to do my duty, as I see it."

"Would you like to know more about me?" Fran asked confidentially of
Mrs. Gregory.

Gregory turned pale. "I don't think it is neces—"

"Do tell me!" exclaimed his wife.

"Oh, Lord!" murmured Simon Jefferson, sinking back into the hall chair.

"Father and mother married secretly," Fran said, solely addressing Mrs. Gregory, but occasionally sending a furtive glance at her husband. "He was a college-student, boarding with his cousin, who was one of the professors. Mother was an orphan and lived with her half- uncle,—a mighty crusty old man, Uncle Ephraim was, who didn't have one *bit* of use for people getting married in secret. Father and mother agreed not to mention their marriage till after his graduation; then he'd go to *his* father and make everything easy, and come for mother. So he went and told him—father's father was a millionaire on Wall Street. Mother's uncle was pretty well fixed, too, but he didn't enjoy anything except religion. When he wasn't at church—he went 'most all the time—he was reading about it. Mother said he was most religious in Hebrew, but he enjoyed his Greek verbs awfully."

Grace Noir asked remotely, "Did you say that your parents eloped?"

"They didn't run far," Fran explained; "they were married in the county, not far from Springfield—"

"I thought you said," Grace interrupted, "that they were in New York."

"Did you?" said Fran politely. "So father graduated, and went away to tell his father all about being

married to Josephine Derry. I don't know what happened then, as he didn't come back to tell. My mother waited and waited—and I was born—and then Uncle Ephraim drove mother out of his house with her tiny baby—that's me—and I grew to be—as old as you see me now. We were always hunting father. We went all over the United States, first and last—it looked like the son of a millionaire ought to be easy to find. But he kept himself close, and there was never a clue. Then mother died. Sometimes she used to tell me that she believed him dead, that if he'd been alive he'd have come for her, because she loved him with all her soul, and wrecked her whole life because of him. She was happiest when she thought he was dead, so I wouldn't say anything, but I was sure he was alive, all right, as big and strong as you please. Oh, *I* know his kind. I've had lots of experience."

"So I'd suppose," said Grace Noir quietly. "May I ask—if you don't mind—if this traveling about the United States didn't take a great deal of money?"

"Oh, we had all the money we wanted," Fran returned easily.

"Indeed? And did you become reconciled to your mother's uncle?"

"Yes—after he was dead. He didn't leave a will, and there wasn't anybody else, and as mother had just been taken from me, the money just naturally came in my hands. But I didn't need it, particularly."

"But before that," Grace persisted; "before, when your mother was first disinherited, how could she make her living?"

"Mother was like me. She didn't stand around folding her hands and crossing her feet—she used 'em. Bless you, I could get along wherever you'd drop me. Success isn't in the world, it's in me, and that's a good thing to know—it saves hunting."

"Do you consider yourself a 'success'?" inquired the secretary with a chilly smile.

"I had everything I wanted except a home," Fran responded with charming good-humor, "and now I've got that. In a New York paper, I found a picture of Hamilton Gregory, and it told about all his charities. It said he had millions, and was giving away everything. I said to myself, 'I'll go there and have him give me a home'—you see, I'd often heard mother speak of him—and I said other things to myself—and then, as I generally do what I tell myself to do—it keeps up confidence in the general manager—I came."

"Dear child," said Mrs. Gregory, stroking her hair, "your mother dead, your father—that kind of a man—you shall indeed find a home with us, for life. And so your father was Mr. Gregory's friend. It seems— strange."

"My father," said Fran, looking at Mr. Gregory inscrutably, "was the best friend you ever had, wasn't he? You loved him better than anybody else in the world, didn't you?"

"I—I—yes," the other stammered, looking at her wildly, and passing his agitated hand across his eyes, as if to shut out some terrible vision, "yes, I—I was—er—fond of—him."

"I guess you were," Fran cried emphatically. "You'd have done anything for him."

"I have this to say," remarked Simon Jefferson, "that I may not come up to the mark in all particulars, and I reckon I have my weaknesses; but I wouldn't own a friend that proved himself the miserable scoundrel, the weak cur, that this child's father proved himself!"

"And I agree with you," declared Grace, who seldom agreed with him in anything. How Mr. Gregory, the best man she had ever known, could be fond of Fran's father, was incomprehensible. Ever since Fran had come knocking at the door, Grace's exalted faith in Mr. Gregory had been perplexed by the foreboding that he was not altogether what she had imagined.

Hamilton Gregory felt the change in her attitude. "That friend," he said quickly, "was not altogether to be censured. At least, he meant to do right. He wanted to do right. With all the strength of his nature, he strove to do right."

"Then why didn't he *do* right?" snapped Simon Jefferson. "Why didn't he go back after that young woman, and take care of her? Huh? What was holding him?"

"He did go back," exclaimed Gregory. "Well—not at first, but afterward. He went to tell his father, and his father showed him that it would never do, that the girl—his wife—wasn't of their sphere, their life, that he couldn't have made her happy—that it wouldn't— that it just wouldn't do. For three years he stayed in the mountains of Germany, the most miserable man in the world. But his conscience wouldn't let him rest. It told him he should acknowledge his wife. So he went back—but she'd

disappeared—he couldn't find her—and he'd never heard—he'd never dreamed of the birth of a—of the —of this girl. He never knew that he had a daughter. Never!"

"Well," said Simon Jefferson, "he's dead now, and that's one comfort. Good thing he's not alive; I'd always be afraid I might come up with him and then, afterward, that I might not get my sentence commuted to life-imprisonment."

"Who is exciting my son?" demanded the old lady from her wheel-chair. Simon Jefferson's red face and starting eyes told plainly that his spirit was up. There was silence out of respect for his weak heart, but there was a general feeling of surprise that Gregory should so determinedly defend his friend.

"After all," said Fran cheerfully, "we are here, and needn't bother about what's past. My mother wasn't given her chance, but she's dead now, blessed soul—and my father had his chance, but it wasn't in him to be a man. Let's forget him as much as we can, and let's have nothing but sweet and peaceful thoughts about mother. That's all over, and I'm here to take my chance with the rest of you. We're the world, while our day lasts."

"What a remarkable child!" murmured Grace Noir, as they prepared to separate. "Quite a philosopher in short dresses."

"They used to call me a prodigy," murmured Fran, as she obeyed Mrs. Gregory's gesture inviting her to follow up-stairs. "Now it's stopped raining," Simon Jefferson complained, as he wheeled his mother toward the back hall.

"That's a good omen," said Fran, pressing Mrs. Gregory's hand. "The moonlight was beautiful when I was on the bridge—when I first came here."

"But we need rain," said Grace Noir reprovingly. Her voice was that of one familiar with the designs of Providence. As usual, she and Hamilton Gregory were about to be left alone.

"Who needs it?" called the unabashed Fran, looking over the banisters.
"The frogs?"

"Life," responded the secretary somberly.

CHAPTER VIII

WAR DECLARED

The April morning was brimming with golden sunshine when Fran looked from the window of her second-story room. Between two black streamers left from last night's rain-clouds, she found the sun making its way up an aisle of intense blue. Below, the lawn stretched in level greenness from Hamilton Gregory's residence to the street, and the grass, fresh from the care of the lawn-mower, mixed yellow tints of light with its emerald hue. Shadows from the tender young leaves decorated the whiteness of the smooth village road in dainty tracery, and splashed the ribbons of rain-drenched granitoid walks with warm shadow-spray.

Fran, eager for the first morning's view of her new home, stared at the half-dozen cottages across the street, standing back in picket- fenced yards with screens of trees before their window-eyes. They showed only as bits of weather-boarding, or gleaming fragments of glass, peeping through the boughs. At one place, nothing was to be seen but stone steps and a chimney; at another, there was an open door and a flashing broom; or a curl of smoke and a face at a window. She thought everything homelike, neighborly. These houses seemed to her closer to the earth than those of New York, or, at any rate, closer in the sense of brotherhood. She drew a deep breath of pungent April essence and murmured: "What a world to live in!"

Fran had spoken in all sincerity when declaring that she wanted nothing but a home; and when she went down to breakfast it was with the expectation that every member of the family would pursue his accustomed routine, undeflected by her presence. She was willing that they should remain what they

were, just as she expected to continue without change; however, not many days passed before she found herself seeking to modify her surroundings. If a strange mouse be imprisoned in a cage of mice, those already inured to captivity will seek to destroy the new-comer. Fran, suddenly thrust into the bosom of a family already fixed in their modes of thought and action, found adjustment exceedingly difficult.

She did not care to mingle with the people of the village—which was fortunate, since her laughing in the tent had scandalized the neighborhood; she would have been content never to cross the boundaries of the homestead, had it not been for Abbott Ashton. It was because of him that she acquiesced in the general plan to send her to school. In the unanimous conviction of the need of change in Fran, and because there were still two months of school, she must pass through this two-months' wringer—she might not acquire polish, but the family hoped some crudities might be squeezed out. It was on the fifth day of her stay, following her startling admission that she had never been to school a day in her life, that unanimous opinion was fused into expressed command—

"You must go to school!"

Fran thought of the young superintendent, and said she was willing.

When Mr. Gregory and the secretary had retired to the library for the day's work, Mrs. Gregory told Fran, "I really, think, dear, that your dresses are much too short. You are small, but your face and manners and even your voice, sometimes, seem old—*quite* old."

Fran showed the gentle lady a soft docility. "Well," she said, "my legs are there, all the time, you know, and I'll show just as much of them, or just as little, as you please."

Simon Jefferson spoke up—"I like to see children wear short dresses— " and he looked at this particular child with approval. That day, she was really pretty. The triangle had been broadened to an oval brow, the chin was held slightly lowered, and there was something in her general aspect, possibly due to the arrangement of folds or colors— heaven knows what, for Simon Jefferson was but a poor male observer— that made a merit of her very thinness. The weak heart of the burly bachelor tingled with pleasure in nice proportions, while his mind attained the aesthetic outlook of a classic age. To be sure, the skirts did show a good deal of Fran; very good—they could not show too much.

"I like," Simon persisted, "to see young girls of fourteen or fifteen, dressed, so to say, in low necks and high stockings in—er—in the airy way such as they are by nature..." It was hard to express.

"Yes," Fran said impartially, "it pleases others, and it doesn't hurt me."

"Fran!" Mrs. Gregory exclaimed, gazing helplessly at the girl with something of a child's awe inspired by venerable years. It was a pathetic appeal to a spirit altogether beyond her comprehension.

Fran's quick eye caught the expression of baffled reaching-forth, of uncertain striving after sympathetic understanding. "You darling lady!" she cried, clasping her hands to keep her arms from flying about the other's neck, "don't you be troubled about me. Bless your heart, I can take care of myself—and you, too! Do you think I'd add a straw to your…Now you hear me: if you want to do it, just put me in long trains with Pullman sleepers, for I'm the little girl for you, dear heart, and I'll do whatever you say. If you want to show people how tame I am, just hold up your hand, and I'll crawl into my cage."

The laughter of Mrs. Gregory sounded wholesome and deep-throated—the child was so deliciously ridiculous. "Come, then," she cried, with a lightness she had not felt for months, "come, crawl into your cage!" And she opened her arms.

With a flash of her lithe body, Fran was in her cage, and, for a time, rested there, while the fire in her dark eyes burned tears to all sorts of rainbow colors. It seemed to her that of all the people in the world, Mrs. Gregory was the last to hold her in affectionate embrace. She cried out with a sob, as if in answer to her dark misgivings—"Oh, but I want to belong to somebody!"

"You shall belong to me!" exclaimed Mrs. Gregory, folding her closer.

"To you?" Fran sobbed, overcome by the wonder of it. "To *you,* dear heart?" With a desperate effort she crowded back intruding thoughts, and grew calm. Looking over her shoulder at Simon Jefferson —"No more short dresses, Mr. Simon," she called, "you know your heart mustn't be excited."

"Fran!" gasped Mrs. Gregory in dismay, "hush!"

But Simon Jefferson beamed with pleasure at the girl's artless ways. He knew what was bad for his heart, and Fran wasn't. Her smiles made him feel himself a monopolist in sunshine. Simon Jefferson

might be fifty, but he still had a nose for roses.

Old Mrs. Jefferson was present, and from her wheel-chair bright eyes read much that dull ears missed. "How gay Simon is!" smiled the mother—he was always her spoiled boy.

Mrs. Gregory called through the trumpet, "I believe Fran has given brother a fresh interest in life."

Simon nodded; he didn't care who knew it. Since his sister's marriage to the millionaire philanthropist, Simon had found life appallingly dull; how could he have found interest in the passing years without his heart-complaint? Hamilton Gregory's perennial absorption in the miseries of folk beyond the horizon, and lack of sympathy with those who sat at his table, set him apart as a model; Simon hated models.

Old Mrs. Jefferson beamed upon Fran and added her commendation: "She pushes me when I want to be pushed, and pulls me when I want to be pulled."

Fran clapped her hands like a child, indeed. "Oh, what a gay old world!" she cried. "There are so many people in it that like me." She danced before the old lady, then wheeled about with such energy that her skirts threatened to level to the breeze.

"Don't, don't!" cried Mrs. Gregory precipitately. *"Fran!"*

"Bravo!" shouted Simon Jefferson. *"Encore!"*

Fran widened her fingers to push down the rebellious dress. "If I don't put leads on me," she said with contrition, "I'll be floating away. When I feel good, I always want to do something wrong—it's awfully dangerous for a person to feel good, I guess. Mrs. Gregory, you say I can belong to you,—when I think about that, I want to dance…I guess you hardly know what it means for Fran to belong to a person. You're going to find out. Come on," she shouted to Mrs. Jefferson, without using the trumpet—always a subtle compliment to those nearly stone-deaf, "I mustn't wheel myself about, so I'm going to wheel you."

As she passed with her charge into the garden, her mind was busy with thoughts of Grace Noir. Belonging to Mrs. Gregory naturally suggested getting rid of the secretary. It would be exceedingly difficult. "But two months ought to settle *her*," Fran mused.

In the meantime, Grace Noir and Gregory sat in the library, silently turning out an immense amount of work, feeding the hungry and consoling the weak with stroke of pen and click of typewriter. If conversation sometimes trickled across the dry expanse of statistical benevolence, it was never, on Grace's part, for pastime. Beneath her words was always an underflowing current, tugging at the listener to bear him away to her chosen haven. As an expert player of checkers knows his moves in advance, so her conversations, however brief, were built up with a unity of purpose which her consciousness of purest motives saved from artificiality.

"About this case, number one hundred forty-three," she said, looking up from her work as copyist, "the girl whose father wouldn't acknowledge her…"

"Write to the matron to give her good clothing and good schooling." He spoke softly. There prevailed an atmosphere of subtle tenderness; on this island—the library—blossomed love of mankind and devotion to lofty ideals. These two mariners found themselves ever surrounded by a sea of indifference; there was not a sail in sight. "It is a sadcase," he murmured.

"You think number one hundred forty-three a sad case?" she repeated, always, when possible, building her next step out of the material furnished by her companion. "But suppose she *is* an impostor. He says she's not his daughter, this number one hundred forty-three. Maybe she isn't. Would you call her conduct *sad*?"

Gregory took exquisite pleasure in arguing with Grace, because her serene assumption of "being in the right gave to her beautiful face a touch of the angelic. "I should call it impossible."

"Impossible? Do you think it's impossible that Fran's deceiving you?
How can you know that she is the daughter of your friend?"

He grew pale. Oh, if he could have denied Fran—if he could have joined Grace in declaring her an impostor! But she possessed proofs so irrefutable that safety lay in admitting her claim, lest she prove more than he had already admitted. "I know it, absolutely. She is the daughter of one who was my most—my most intimate friend."

Grace repeated with delicate reproof—"Your intimate friend!"

"I know it was wrong for him to desert his wife."

"Wrong!" How inadequate seemed that word from her pure lips!

"But," he faltered, "we must make allowances. My friend married Fran's mother in secret because she was utterly worldly—frivolous—a butterfly. Her own uncle was unable to control her—to make her go to church. Soon after the marriage he found out his mistake—it broke his heart, the tragedy of it. I don't excuse him for going away to Europe—"

"I am glad you don't. He was no true man, but a weakling. I am glad I have never been thrown with such a—a degenerate."

"But, Miss Grace," he urged pleadingly, "do you think my friend, when he went back to find her and she was gone—do you think he should have kept on hunting? Do you think, Grace, that he should have remained yoked to an unbeliever, after he realized his folly?"

There was heavenly compassion in her eyes, for suddenly she had divined his purpose in defending Fran's father. He was thinking of his own wife, and of his wife's mother and brother—how they had ceased to show sympathy in what he regarded as the essentials of life. Her silence suggested that as she could not speak without casting reflection upon Mrs. Gregory, she would say nothing, and this tact was grateful to his grieved heart.

To the degree that Grace Noir took solemn satisfaction in attending every service of the Walnut Street church, no matter what the weather, she had grown to regard non-attendants as untrue soldiers, bivouacking amidst scenes of feasting and dancing. She made nothing of Mrs. Gregory's excuse that she stayed at home with her mother—the old lady should be wheeled to the meeting-house, even if against her inclinations. As for the services being bad for Simon Jefferson's weak heart,—she did not think they would hurt his heart or that it would matter if they did. Visible, flesh-and-blood presence was needful to uphold the institution, and Grace would have given more for one body resting upright in a pew, than for a hundred members who were there only "in the spirit".

"I have been thinking of something very strange," Grace said, with a marked effort to avoid the issue lest she commit the indiscretion of blaming her employer's wife. "I remember having heard you say that when you were a young man, you left your father's home to live with a cousin in a distant town who happened to be a teacher in a college, and that you were graduated from his college. Don't you think it marvelous, this claim of Fran, who says that her father, when a young man, went to live with a cousin who was a college professor, and that he was graduated from that college? And she says that her father's father was a rich man—just as yours was—and that the cousin is dead —just as yours is."

At these piercing words, Gregory bowed his head to conceal his agitation. Could it be possible that she had guessed all and yet, in spite of all, could use that tone of kindness? It burst upon him that if he and she could hold this fatal secret in common, they might, in sweetest comradeship, form an alliance against fate itself.

She persisted: "The account that Fran gives of her father is really your own history. What does that show?"

He spoke almost in a whisper. "My friend and I were much alike." Then he looked up swiftly to catch a look of comprehension by surprise, if such a look were there.

Grace smiled coolly. "But hardly identical, I presume. Don't you see that Fran has invented her whole story, and that she didn't have enough imagination to keep from copying after your biographical sketch in the newspaper? I don't believe she is your friend's daughter. I don't believe you could ever have liked the father of a girl like Fran,—that he could have been your intimate friend."

"Well—" faltered Gregory. But why should he defend Fran?

"Mr. Gregory," she asked, as if what she was about to say belonged to what had gone before, "would it greatly inconvenience you for me to leave your employment?"

He was electrified. "Grace! Inconvenience me!—would you—could…"

"I have not decided—not yet. Speaking of being yoked with unbelievers—I have never told you that Mr. Robert Clinton has wanted me to marry him. As long as he was outside of the church, of course it was impossible. But now that he is converted—"

"Grace!" groaned the pallid listener.

"He would like me to go with him to Chicago."

"But you couldn't love Bob Clinton—he isn't worthy of you, Grace. It's impossible. Heaven knows I've had disappointments enough—" He started up and came toward her, his eyes glowing. "Will you make my life a complete failure, after all?"

"Love him?" Grace repeated calmly. "This is merely a question of doing the most good."

"But, Grace, love must be considered—if it comes too late, it overturns the purest purposes. Don't wait until it's too late as I— as—I repeat, until it's too late."

"I know nothing about love."

"Then let me teach you, Grace, let—"

"Shall we not discuss it?" she said gently. "That is best, I think. If I decide to marry Mr. Clinton, I will tell you even before I tell him. I don't know what I shall choose as my best course."

"But, Grace! What could I do—without—"

"Shall we just agree to say no more about it?" she softly interposed. "That is wisest until my decision is made. We were talking about Fran —do you not think this a good opportunity for Mrs. Gregory to attend services? Fran can stay with Mrs. Jefferson."

"I have no doubt," he said, still agitated, "that my wife would find it easy enough to go to church, if she really wanted to go."

"Mr. Gregory!" she reproved him.

"Well," he cried, somewhat defiantly, "don't you think she could go, if she wanted to?"

"Well," Grace answered slowly, "this girl will leave her without any— any excuse."

"Oh, Miss Grace, if my wife were only—like you—I mean, about going to church!"

"I consider it," she responded, "the most important thing in the world." Her emphatic tone proved her sincerity. The church on Walnut Street stood, for her, as the ark; those who remained outside, at the call of the bell, were in danger of engulfment.

After a long silence, Grace looked up from her typewriter. "Mr. Gregory," she said pausingly, "you are unhappy."

Nothing could have been sweeter to him than her sympathy, except happiness itself. "Yes," he admitted, with a great sigh, "I am very unhappy, but you understand me, and that is a little comfort. If you should marry Bob Clinton—Grace, tell me you'll not think of it again."

"And you are unhappy," said Grace, steadfastly ruling Bob Clinton out of the discussion, "on account of Fran."

He burst forth impulsively—"Ever since she came to town!" He checked himself. "But I owe it to my friend to shelter her. She wants to stay and—and she'll have to, if she demands it."

"You are unhappy," Grace quietly pursued, "because her character is already formed, because she is a girl who laughs at sacred things, and mocks the only true objects of life. You know it is too late to change her, and you know her influence is bad for—for everybody in this house."

"But it can't be helped," he insisted disconsolately. "If she wants to stay, I can't help it. But, Grace, you are right about her influence. Even my wife finds new strength to resist what she knows to be her duty, because the girl likes her."

"Do you owe more to your dead friend," Grace asked, with passionate solemnity, "than to the living God?"

He shrank back. "But I can't send her away," he persisted in nervous haste. "I can't. But heaven bless you, Grace, for your dear thought of me."

"You will bless me with more reason," said Grace softly, "when Fran decides to go away. She'll tire of this house—I promise it. She'll go—just wait!—she'll go, as unceremoniously as she came. Leave it to me, Mr. Gregory." In her earnestness she started up, and then, as if to conceal her growing resolution, she walked swiftly to the window as if to hold her manuscript to the light. Gregory followed her.

"If she would only go!" he groaned. "Grace! Do you think you could?—

Yes, I will leave everything to you."

"She'll go," Grace repeated fixedly.

The window at which they stood overlooked the garden into which Fran had wheeled old Mrs. Jefferson.

Fran, speaking through the ear-trumpet with as much caution as deafness would tolerate, said, "Dear old lady, look up at the library window, if you please, for the muezzin has climbed his minaret to call to prayers."

Very little of this reached its destination—muezzin was in great danger of complicating matters, but the old lady caught "library window", and held it securely. She looked up. Hamilton Gregory and Grace Noir were standing at the tower window, to catch the last rays of the sun. The flag of truce between them was only a typewritten sheet of manuscript. Grace held the paper obliquely toward the west; Hamilton leaned nearer and, with his delicate white finger, pointed out a word. Grace nodded her head in gentle acquiescence.

"Amen," muttered Fran. "Now let everybody sing!"

The choir leader and his secretary vanished from sight.

"Just like the play in Hamlet," Fran said half-aloud. "And now that the inside play is over, I guess it's time for old Ham to be doing something."

Mrs. Jefferson gripped the arms of her wheel-chair and resumed her tale, as if she had not been interrupted. It was of no interest as a story, yet possessed a sentimental value from the fact that all the characters save the raconteur were dead, and possibly all but her forgotten. Fran loved to hear the old lady evoke the shades of long ago, shades who would never again assume even the palest manifestation to mortals, when this old lady had gone to join them.

There was "Cousin Sarah Tom", who had been present at the great ball in Lexington. "Even Cousin Sarah Tom was there," said Mrs. Jefferson, thus for ever stamping this ghostly outline with greatness. And there was "Aunt Mandy" hovering on the outskirts of the general theme—"Aunt Mandy was there, as full of fun and mischief as ever." The old lady's stories bristled with such subsidiary characters concerning whom it was sufficient to say that they were "there". Sometimes so many were "there" that the historian forgot her original intention and wandered aimlessly among irrelevant acquaintances.

Usually Fran brought her back, with gentle hand, but to-day she divined subterfuge; the tale was meant to hide Mrs. Jefferson's real feelings. Fran ventured through the trumpet:

"I wish there was a man-secretary on this place, instead of a woman."

Mrs. Jefferson snatched away the instrument with indignation. "What is that you say?" she asked, glaring. "In bed with a woman? Who? What woman? "Then she clapped the trumpet to her ear as if defying a French romance to do its worst.

Fran called, "Your grandmother-goosey, and not so loud, if you please!"

The other drew herself up, while her black lace cap quivered at every ribbon-end. What was this? How dare this chit?

Fran took the tube with sudden decisiveness. "All right," she called, "you can take it that way, if you want to. But let me tell you *one* thing, dear old soldier—there's going to be a big fight put up on these grounds. I guess you ought to stay out of it. But either I or the secretary has got to *git.*"

Fran was not unmindful of grammar, even of rhetoric, on occasion. She knew there was no such word as "git", but she was seeking to symbolize her idea in sound. As she closed her teeth, each little pearl meeting a pearly rival, her "git" had something of the force of physical ejectment.

Behind large spectacle lenses, sparks flashed from Mrs. Jefferson's eyes. She sniffed battle. But her tightly compressed lips showed that she lacked both Fran's teeth and Fran's intrepidity. One steps cautiously at seventy-odd.

Fran comprehended. The old lady must not let it be suspected that she was aware of Gregory's need of cotton in straining ears, such as had saved Ulysses from siren voices. The pretense of observing no danger kept the fine old face uncommonly grim.

"Little girls shouldn't fight," was her discreet rejoinder. Then leaning over the wheel, she advanced her snow-white head to the head of coal-black. "Better not stir up *dragons.*"

Fran threw back her head and laughed defiantly. "Bring on your dragons," she cried boastfully. "There's not one of 'em that I'm afraid of." She extended one leg and stretched forth her arm. "I'll say to the Dragon, 'Stand up'—and she'll stand: I'll say 'Lie down'— and down she'll lie. I'll say *Git*—and she'll —" Fran waved her dragon to annihilation.

"Goodness," the old lady exclaimed, getting nothing of this except the pantomime; that, however, was eloquent. She recalled the picture of David in her girlhood's Sunday-school book. "Are you defying the Man of Gath?" She broke into a delicious smile which seemed to flood the wrinkles of her face with the sunshine of many dear old easy-going years.

[Illustration with caption: "'Lie down'—and down she'll lie."]

Fran smote her forehead. "I have a few pebbles here," she called through the trumpet.

Mrs. Jefferson grasped the other's thin arm, and said, with zestful energy, "Let her have 'em, David, let her have 'em!"

CHAPTER IX

SKIRMISHING

Fran made no delay in planning her campaign against Grace Noir. Now that her position in Hamilton Gregory's household was assured, she resolved to seek support from Abbott Ashton. That is why, one afternoon, Abbott met her in the lower hall of the public school, after the other pupils had gone, and supposed he was meeting her by accident.

Since their parting in the moonlight, Abbott had lost his vivid impression of Fran. As superintendent, school hours were fully occupied in teaching special classes, overlooking his staff of teachers, and punishing such refractory children as were relegated to his authority. The rest of the time was spent in pursuing higher education; and in the sunburst of splendid ideals, the mote-beam of a Fran had floated and danced almost unperceived.

"Good evening, Nonpareil," he said, pleased that her name should have come to him at once. His attentive look found her different from the night of their meeting; she had lost her elfish smile and with it the romance of the unknown and unexpected. Was it because, at half-past four, one's charm is at lowest ebb? The janitor was sweeping down the hall stairs. The very air was filled with dusty realism—Fran was no longer pretty; he had thought—

"Then you haven't forgotten me," murmured Fran.

"No," he answered, proud of the fact. "You have made your home with Mr. Gregory. You are in Miss Bull's class-room. I knew Mr. Gregory would befriend you—he's one of the best men living. You should be very happy there."

"No," said Fran, shaking her head decidedly, "not happy."

He was rather glad the janitor was sweeping them out of the house. "You must find it pretty hard," he remarked, with covert reproach, "to keep from being happy."

"It isn't at all hard for me," Fran assured him, as she paused on the front steps. "Really, it's easy to be unhappy where Miss Grace Noir is."

It happened that just then the name Grace Noir was a sort of talisman opening to the young man's vision the interior of wonderful treasure- caves; it was like crying "Sesame!" to the very rocks, for though he was not in love with Gregory's secretary, he fancied the day of fate was not far ahead.

He had no time to seek fair and romantic ladies. Five years ago, Grace Noir had come from Chicago as if to spare him the trouble of a search. Fate seemed to thrust her between his eyes and the pages of

his text- books. At church, which he attended regularly, Grace was always present, and to gaze at her angelic face was, in itself, almost a religious exercise. Abbott never felt so unworthy as when in her presence; an unerring instinct seemed to have provided her with an absolute standard of right and wrong, and she was so invariably right that no human affection was worthy of her unless refined seven times. Within himself, Abbott discovered dross.

"Try to be a good girl, Fran," he counseled. "Be good, and your association with Miss Noir will prove the happiest experience of your life."

"Be good," she returned mockingly, "and you will be Miss Noir." Then she twisted her mouth. "She makes me feel like tearing up things. I don't like her. I hoped you'd be on my side."

He came down the steps gravely. "She is my friend."

"I'm a good deal like you," Fran declared, following. "I can like most anything and anybody; but I can't go *that* far. Well, I don't like Miss Noir and she doesn't like me—isn't that fair?"

"Examine yourself," he advised, "and find out what it is in you that she doesn't like; then get rid of what you find."

"Huh!" Fran exclaimed, "I'm going to get rid of her, all right."

He saw the old elfish smile now when he least wanted to see it, for it threatened the secretary, mocked the grave superintendent, and asserted the girl's right to like whom she pleased. Self-respect and loyalty to Grace hastened Abbott's departure, leaving the spirit of mockery to escape the janitor's broom as best it might.

Fran escaped, recognizing defeat; but on her homeward way, she was already preparing herself for the next move. So intent was she in estimating the forces on both sides, that she gave no heed to the watchful faces at cottage windows, she did not recognize the infrequent passers-by, nor observe the occasional buggies that creaked along the rutted road. With Grace stood, of course, Hamilton Gregory; and, judging from Bob Clinton's regular visits, and his particular attentions to Grace, Fran classed him also as a victim of the enemy. It now seemed that Abbott Ashton followed the flag Noir; and behind these three leaders, massed the congregation of Walnut Street church, and presumably the town of Littleburg.

Fran could count for her support an old bachelor with a weak heart, and an old lady with an ear-trumpet. The odds were terribly against her.

Absolutely neutral stood the one most vitally concerned in the struggle about to take place. Like the king of a chess-board, Mrs. Gregory was resolved, it would appear, to take not even the one step within royal prerogative. Fran wondered, her brow creasing in baffled perplexity, if it ever occurred to Mrs. Gregory that her husband might, say at some far, far distant day, grow too much interested in his secretary? Did the wife perceive his present rate of interest, and fancy, at that rate, that he might not reach a point beyond prudence? Surely she must realize that, in the family economy, the secretary might be spared; but if so, she made no sign.

The first light skirmish between Fran and Grace took place on Sunday. All the Gregory household were at a late breakfast. Sunday-school bells were ringing their first call, and there was not a cloud in the heavens as big as a man's hand, to furnish excuse for non-attendance.

The secretary fired the first shot. Apropos of nothing that had gone before, but as if it were an integral part of the conversation, she offered—"And, Mrs. Gregory, it is so nice that you can go to church now, since, if Fran doesn't want to go, herself—"

"Which she doesn't, herself," Fran interjected.

"So I presumed," Grace remarked significantly. "Mrs. Gregory, Fran can stay with your mother—since she doesn't care for church—and you can attend services as you did when I first came to Littleburg."

"I am sure," Mrs. Gregory said quietly, "that it would be much better for Fran to go to church. She ought to go—I don't like to think of her staying away from the services—and my duty is with mother."

Grace said nothing, but the expression of her mouth seemed to cry aloud. Duty, indeed! What did Mrs. Gregory know about duty, neglecting the God who had made her, to stay with an old lady who ought to be wheeled to church! Mrs. Gregory was willing for her husband to fight his Christian warfare alone. But alone? No! not while Grace could go with him. If all the rest of Walnut Street church should remain in tents of indifference, she and Hamilton Gregory would be found on the field.

Gregory coldly addressed Fran: "Then, will *you* go to church?" It was as if he complained, "Since my wife won't—"

"I might laugh," said Fran. "I don't understand religion."

Grace felt her purest ideals insulted. She rose, a little pale, but without rudeness. "Will you please excuse me?" she asked with admirable restraint.

"Miss Grace!" Hamilton Gregory exclaimed, distressed. That she should be driven from his table by an insult to their religion was intolerable. "Miss Grace—forgive her."

Mrs. Gregory was pale, for she, too, had felt the blow. *"Fran!"* she exclaimed reproachfully.

Old Mrs. Jefferson stared from the girl seated at the table to the erect secretary, and her eyes kindled with admiration. Had Fran commanded the "dragon" to "stand"?

Simon Jefferson held his head close to his plate, as if hoping the storm might pass over his head.

"Don't go away!" Fran cried, overcome at sight of Mrs. Gregory's distress. "Sit down, Miss Noir. Let me be the one to leave the room, since it isn't big enough for both of us." She darted up, and ran to the head of the table.

Mrs. Gregory buried her face in her hands.

"Don't you bother about me," Fran coaxed; "to think of giving *you* pain, dear lady! I wouldn't hurt you for anything in the world, and the person who would isn't worthy of being touched by my foot," and Fran stamped her foot. "If it'll make you a mite happier, I'll go to church, and Sunday-school, and prayer meeting, and the young people's society, and the Ladies' Aid, and the missionary society, and the choir practice, and the night service and—and—"

Hamilton Gregory felt that he should take some part in this small drama, but he did not know exactly what part: "It would make us all happier for you to go. And what is far more important, child, it would make you happier; you'd be learning how to do right, and be good."

"Oh, and would it?" she flashed at him, somewhat incoherently. "Yes, I know some folks think it makes 'em good just to sit in meeting-houses, while somebody's talking about religion. But look at me. Why! the people who ought to have loved me, and cared for my mother—the people that didn't know but what we were starving—they wouldn't have missed a service any sooner than you would; no, sir. I want to tell you," Fran cried, her face flaming, her voice vibrating with emotion long pent-up, "just the reason that religion's nothing to me. It's because the only kind I've known is going to the church, dressed up, and sitting in the church feeling pious—and then, on the outside, and between times, being just as grasping, and as anxious to overreach everybody else, and trying just as hard to get even with their enemies, as if there wasn't a church on the ground."

"This is sacrilege!" gasped Hamilton Gregory. "You show me a little religion," Fran cried, carried beyond herself, "that means doing something besides ringing bells and hiring preachers; you show me a little religion that means making people happy—not people clear out of sight, but those living in your own house—and maybe I'll like it and want some of it. Got any of that kind? But if I stay here, I'll say too much—I'll go, so you can all be good together—" She darted from the room.

Grace looked at Gregory, seeming to ask him if, after this outrageous behavior, he would suffer Fran to dwell under his roof. Of course, Mrs. Gregory did not count; Grace made no attempt to understand this woman who, while seemingly of a yielding nature, could show such hardness, such a fixed purpose in separating herself from her husband's spiritual adventures. It made Grace feel so sorry for the husband that she quietly resumed her place at the table.

Grace was now more than ever resolved that she would drive Fran away— it had become a religious duty. How could it be accomplished? The way was already prepared; the secretary was convinced that Fran was an impostor. It was merely needful to prove that the girl was not the daughter of Gregory's dead friend. Grace would have to delve into the past, possibly visit the scenes of Gregory's youth—but it would pay. She looked at her employer with an air suggesting protection.

Gregory's face relaxed on finding himself once more near her. Fortunately for his peace of mind, he could not read the purposehidden behind those beautiful eyes.

"I wonder," Simon Jefferson growled, "why somebody doesn't badger *me* to go to church!" Indignant because Fran had fled the pleasing fields of his interested vision, he paused, as if to invite antagonism; but all avoided the anticlimax.

He announced, "This talk has excited me. If we can't live and let live, I'll go and take my meals at Miss Sapphira Clinton's."

No one dared to answer him, not even Grace. He marched into the garden where Fran sat huddled upon a rustic bench. "I was just saying," Simon told her ingratiatingly, "that if all this to-do over religion isn't put a stop to, I'll take *my* meals at the Clintons'!"

Fran looked up at him without moving her chin from her palms, and asked as she tried, apparently, to tie her feet into a knot, "Isn't that where Abbott Ashton boards?"

"Do you mean Professor Ashton?" he returned, with subtle reproof.

Fran, still dejected, nodded carelessly. "We're both after the same man."

Simon lit the pipe which his physician had warned him was bad for his heart. "Yes, Professor Ash-ton boards at the Clintons'."

"Must be awfully jolly at the Clintons'," Fran said wistfully.

CHAPTER X

AN AMBUSCADE

Fran's conception of the Clinton Boarding-House, the home of jollity, was not warranted by its real atmosphere. Since there were not many inhabitants of Littleburg detached from housekeeping, Miss Sapphira Clinton depended for the most part on "transients"; and, to hold such in subjection, preventing them from indulging in that noisy gaiety to which "transients" are naturally inclined—just because they are transitory—the elderly spinster had developed an abnormal solemnity.

This solemnity was not only beneficial to "drummers" and "court men" acutely conscious of being away from home, but it helped her brother Bob. Before the charms of Grace Noir had penetrated his thick skin, the popular Littleburg merchant was as unmanageable as the worst. Before he grew accustomed to fall into a semi-comatose condition at the approach of Grace Noir, and, therefore, before his famous attempt to "get religion", the bachelor merchant often swore—not from aroused wrath, but from his peculiar sense of humor. In those Anti-Grace and heathen days, Bob, sitting on the long veranda of the green frame building, one leg swinging over the other knee, would say, "Yes, damn it," or, "No, damn it," as the case might be. It was then that the reproving protest of his sister's face would jelly in the fat folds of her double chin, helping, somewhat, to cover profanity with a prudent veil.

Miss Sapphira liked a joke—or at least she thought so—as well as anybody; but like a too-humorous author, she found that to be as funny as possible was bad for business. Goodness knows there was enough in Littleburg to be solemn over, what with the funerals, and widowers marrying again, yes, and widows, too; and there wasn't always as much rejoicing over babies as the county paper would have you believe! The "traveling men" were bad enough, needing to be reminded of their wives whom they'd left at home, and, she'd be bound, had forgotten. But when one man, whether a traveler or not—even a staid young teacher like Abbott Ashton, for instance—a young man who was almost like a son to her—when *he* secluded himself in the night-time—by himself? with another male? oh, dear, no!—with a Fran, for example— what was the world coming to?

"There they stood," she told Bob, "the two of them, all alone on the foot-bridge, and it was after nine o'clock. If I hadn't been in a hurry to get home to see that the roomers didn't set the house afire, not a soul would have seen the two colloguing."

"And it don't seem to have done *you* any good," remarked her brother, who, having heard the tale twenty times, began to look upon the event almost as a matter of course. *"You'd* better not have saw them,"—at an early age Bob had cut off his education, and it had stopped growing at that very place. Perhaps he had been elected president of the school-board on the principle that we best appreciate what does not belong to us.

"My home has been Abbott Ashton's home," said Miss Sapphira, "since the death of his last living relation, and her a step, and it a mercy, for nobody could get along with her, and she wouldn't let people leave her alone. You know how fond I am of Abbott, but your position is very responsible. You could get rid of him by lifting your finger, and people are making lots of talk; it's going to injure you. People don't want to send their tender young innocent girls—they're a mighty hardened and knowing set, nowadays, though, I must say—to a superintendent that stands on bridges of nights, holding hands, and her a young slip of a thing. All alone, Robert, all alone; there's going to be a complaint of the school-board, that's what there's going to be, and you'll have to look out for your own interests. You must talk to Abbott. Him a-standing on that bridge—"

"He ain't stood there as often as I've been worried to death a-hearing of it," growled the ungrateful Bob, who was immensely fond of Abbott.

Miss Sapphira spoke with amazingly significant double nods between each word—"And…I…saw… only…four…days…ago—"

She pointed at the school-house which was almost directly across the street, its stone steps facing the long veranda. "They were the last to come out of that door. You may say she's a mere child. Mere children are not in Miss Bull's classes."

"But Abbott says the girl is far advanced."

"Far advanced! You may well say! I'll be bound she is—and carrying on with Abbott on the very school-house steps. Yes, I venture she *is* advanced. You make me ashamed to hear you."

Bob tugged at his straw-colored mustache; he would not swear, for whatever happened, he was resolved to lead the spiritual life. "See here, Sapphira, I'm going to tell you something. I had quite a talk with Abbott about that bridge-business—after you'd spread it all over town, sis—and if you'll believe me, she waylaid him on those school- steps. *He* didn't want to talk with her. Why, he left her standing there. She made him mad, finding fault with the very folks that have taken her up. He's disgusted. That night at the camp-meeting, he had to take her out of the tent—he was asked to do it—"

"He didn't have to stand, a-holding her hand."

"—And as soon as he'd shown her the way to Brother Gregory's, he came on back to the tent, I saw him in the aisle."

"And she whistled at me," cried Miss Sapphira—"the limb!"

"Now, listen, Sapphira, and quit goading. Abbott says that Miss Bull is having lots of trouble with Fran—"

"See that, now!"

"—Because Fran won't get her lessons, being contrary—"

"I wish you could have seen her whistling at me, that night."

"Hold on. So this very evening Miss Bull is going to send her down to Abbott's office to be punished, or dismissed. This very evening he wants me to be over there while he takes her in hand."

"Abbott is going to punish that girl?" cried Miss Sapphira; "going to take her in hand? What do you mean by 'taking her in hand'? She is too old! Robert, you make me blush."

"You ain't a-blushing, Sapphira," her brother assured her, good- naturedly, "you're suffering from the hot weather. Yes, he's to punish her at four o'clock, and I'm to be present, to stop all this confoun— I mean this ungodly gossip."

"You'd better wear your spectacles, Bob, so you'll look old and settled. I'm not always sure of you, either."

"Sapphira, if I hadn't joined the church, I'd say—" He threw up his hand and clenched his fist as if he had caught an oath and meant to hold it tight. Then his honest face beamed. "See here, I've got an idea. Suppose you make it a point to be sitting out here on the veranda at about half-past four, or five. You'll see Fran come sneaking out of that door like a whipped kitten. She'll look everlastingly wilted. I don't know whether Abbott will stuff her full of fractions and geography, or make her stand in a corner—but you'll see her wilted."

Miss Sapphira was highly gratified. "I wish you'd talked this reasonable at first. It's always what people *don't* see that the most harm comes of. I'll give a little tea out here on the veranda, and the

worst talkers in town will be in these chairs when you bring Fran away from Abbott's office. And I'll explain it all to 'em, and they'll *know* Abbott is all right, just as I've always known."

"Get Miss Grace to come," Bob said sheepishly. "She doesn't like Fran, and she'll be glad to know Abbott is doing his duty by her. Later, I'll drop in and have a bite with you."

This, then, was Bob's "idea", that no stone might be left unturned to hide the perfect innocence of the superintendent. He had known Abbott Ashton as a bare-legged urchin running on errands for his widowed mother. He had watched him through studious years, had believed in his future career—and now, no bold adventuress, though adopted into Hamilton Gregory's home, should be allowed to spoil Abbott's chances of success.

The chairman of the school-board had talked confidentially with Grace Noir, and found her as convinced that Fran was a degenerate as was Bob that Grace was an angel. As he went to the appointment, he was thinking not so much of the culprit Fran, as of Grace—what a mouth, what a foot! If all saints were as beautiful as she, religion would surely be the most popular thing on earth.

In his official character as chairman of the board, Robert Clinton marched with dignity into the superintendent's office, meaning to bear away the wilted Fran before the eyes of woman. Abbott Ashton saw him enter with a sense of relief. The young man could not understand why he had held Fran's hand, that night on the foot-bridge. Not only had the sentiment of that hour passed away, but the interview Fran had forced upon him at the close of a recent school-day, had inspired him with actual hostility. It seemed the irony of fate that a mere child, a stranger, should, because of senseless gossip, endanger his chances of reappointment—a reappointment which he felt certain was the best possible means of advancement. Why had he held Fran's little hand? He had never dreamed of holding Grace's—ah, there was a hand, indeed!

"Has she been sent down?" Bob asked, in the hoarse undertone of a fellow-conspirator.

"No." Abbott was eager to prove his innocence. "I haven't seen a sign of her, but I'm looking every minute—glad you're here."

Confidences were impracticable, because of a tousled-headed, ink- stained pupil who gloomed in a corner.

"Why, hello there, Jakey!" cried Clinton, disconcerted; he had hoped that Fran's subjugation might take place without witnesses. "What are *you* doing here, hey?"

"Waitin' to be whirped," was the defiant rejoinder.

"Tell the professor you're sorry for what you've done, so you can run along," said the chairman of the board persuasively.

"Naw, I ain't sorry," returned Jakey, hands in pockets. Then bethinking himself—"But I ain't done nothin'."

Abbott said regretfully, "He'll have to be whipped."

Clinton nodded, and sat down solemnly, breathing hard. Abbott was restlessly pacing the floor, and Bob was staring at him unwinkingly, when the door opened and in came Fran.

Abbott frowned heavily, but the wrinkles in his brow could not mar the attractiveness of his handsome young face. He was too fine looking, the chairman reflected uneasily, for his duties. His figure was too athletic, his features too suggestive of aristocratic tastes and traditions. Clinton wished he would thrust a pen behind his ear. As for himself, after one brief glance at Fran, he fumbled for his spectacles.

Fran walked up to Abbott hesitatingly, and spoke with the indistinctness of awed humility. "You are to punish me," she explained, "by making me work out this original proposition"—showing the book—"and you are to keep me here till I get it."

Abbott asked sternly, "Did Miss Bull send me this message?"

"She is named that," Fran murmured, her eyes fastened on the open page.

From the yard came the shouts of children, breaking the bonds of learning for a wider freedom. Abbott, gazing severely on this slip of a girl, found her decidedly commonplace in appearance. How the moonlight must have bewitched him! Her rebellious hair hung over her face like a shaggy mane—what

a small creature to be dressed as a woman, and how ridiculous that the skirts should reach even to her ankles! It had not been so, on the night of destiny. He preferred the shorter dress, but neither she nor her attire was anything to him. He rejoiced that Robert Clinton was there to witness his indifference.

"This is the problem," Fran said, with exceeding primness, pronouncing the word as if it were too large for her, and holding up the book with a slender finger placed upon certain italicized words.

"Let me see it," said Abbott, with professional dryness. He grasped the book to read the proposition. His hand was against hers, but she did not draw away, for had she done so, how could he have found the place?

Fran, with uplifted eyes, spoke in the plaintive accents of a five- year-old child: "Right there, sir...it's awful hard."

Robert Clinton cleared his throat and produced a sound bursting with accumulated *h's* and *r's*—his warning passed unheeded.

Never before had Abbott had so much of Fran. The capillaries of his skin, as her hand quivered warmly against his, seemed drawing her in; and as she escaped from her splendid black orbs, she entered his brain by the avenue of his own thirsty eyes. What was the use to tell himself that she was commonplace, that his position was in danger because of her? Suddenly her hair no longer reminded him of the flying mane of a Shetland pony; it fell slantwise past the corners of her eyes, making a triangle of smooth white skin to the roots of the hair, and it seemed good, just because it was Fran's way and not after a machine-turned fashion; Fran was done by hand, there was no doubt of that.

"Sit there," Abbott said, gravely pointing. She obeyed without a word, leaving the geometry as hostage in the teacher's hand. When seated at a discreet distance, she looked over at Bob Clinton. He hastily drew on his spectacles, that he might look old.

Abbott volunteered, "This is Mr. Clinton, President of the Board."

"I know," said Fran, staring at her pencil and paper, "he's at the head of the show, and watches when the wild animals are tamed."

Clinton drew forth a newspaper, and opened it deliberately.

Fran scribbled for some time, then looked over at him again. "Did you get it?" she asked, with mild interest.

"Did I get—*what?"* he returned, with puzzled frown.

"Oh, I don't know what it is," said Fran with humility; "the name of it's 'Religion'."

"If I were you," Clinton returned, flushing, "I'd be ashamed to refer to the night you disgraced yourself by laughing in the tent."

"Fran," Abbott interposed severely, "attend to your work."

Fran bent her head over the desk, but was not long silent. "I don't like *a-b-c* and *d-e-f,*" she observed with more energy than she had hitherto displayed. "They're equal to each other, but I don't know why, and I don't care, because it doesn't seem to matter. Nothing interests me unless it has something to do with living. I don't care how far Mars is from the earth—if it was next door, I wouldn't want to leave home. These angles and lines are nothing to me; what I care for is this time I'm wasting, sitting in a stuffy old room, while the good big world is enjoying itself just outside the window." She started up impetuously.

"Sit down!" Abbott commanded.

"Fran!" exclaimed Robert Clinton, stamping his foot, *"sit down!"*

Fran sank back upon the bench.

"I suspect," said Abbott mildly, "that they have put you in classes too far advanced. We must try you in another room—"

"But I don't want to be tried in rooms," Fran explained, "I want to be tried in acts—deeds. Until I came here, I'd never been to school a day in my life," she went on in a confidential tone." I agreed to attend because I imagined school ought to have some connection with life—something in it mixed up with love and friendship and justice and mercy. Wasn't I silly! I even believed—just fancy!—that you might really teach me something about religion. But, no! it's all books, nothing but books."

"Fran," Abbott reasoned, "if we put you in a room where you can understand the things we try to teach, if we make you thorough—"

"I don't want to be thorough," she explained, "I want to be happy. I guess all that schools were meant to do is to teach folks what's in books, and how to stand in a straight line. The children in Class A, or Class B have their minds sheared and pruned to look alike; but I don't want my brain after anybody's pattern."

"You'll regret this, Miss," declared Clinton, in a threatening tone.
"You sit down. Do you want the name of being expelled?"

"I don't care very much about the names of things," said Fran coolly; "there are lots of respectable names that hide wickedness." Her tone changed: "But yonder's another wild animal for you to train; did you come to see him beaten?" She darted to the corner, and seated herself beside Jakey.

"Say, now," Bob remonstrated, pulling his mustache deprecatingly, "everybody knows I wouldn't see a dog hurt if it could be helped. I'm Jakey's friend, and I'd be yours, Fran—honestly—if I could. But how's a school to be run without authority? You ain't reasonable. All we want of you is to be biddable."

"And *you!"* cried Fran to Abbott, beginning to give way to high pressure, "I thought you were a school-teacher, not *just*, but *also*—a something very nice, also a teacher. But not you. Teacher's all you are, just rules and regulations and authority and chalk and *a-b-c* and *d-e-f."*

Abbott crimsoned. Was she right? Was he not something very nice plus his vocation? He found himself desperately wishing that she might think so.

Fran, after one long glowing look at him, turned to the lad in disgrace, and placed her hand upon his stubborn arm. "Have you a mother?" she asked wistfully.

"Yeh," mumbled the lad, astonished at finding himself addressed, not as an ink-stained husk of humanity, but as an understanding soul.

"I haven't," said Fran softly, talking to him as if unconscious of the presence of two listening men, "but I had one, a few years ago—and, oh, it seems so long since she died, Jakey—three years is a pretty long time to be without a mother. And you can't think what a fault- blindest, spoilingest, candiest mother she was. I'm glad yours is living, for you still have the chance to make her proud and happy,... No matter how fine I may turn out—do you reckon I'll ever be admired by anybody, Jakey? Huh! I guess not. But if I were, mother wouldn't be here to enjoy it. Won't you tell Professor Ashton that you are sorry? "

"Fran—" Abbott began.

Fran made a mouth at him. "I don't belong to your school any more," she informed him. "Mr. School-Director can tell you the name of what he can do to me; he'll find it classified under the E's."

After this explosion, she turned again to the lad: "I saw you punch that boy, Jakey, and I heard you say you didn't, and yet it was a good punch. What made you deny it? Punches aren't bad ideas. If I could strike out like you did, I'd wait till I saw a man bullying a weaker one, and I'd stand up to him—" Fran leaped impulsively to her feet, and doubled her arm—"and I'd let her land! Punching's a good thing, and, oh, how it's needed....Except at school—you mustn't do anything human here, you must be an oyster at school."

"Aw-right," said Jakey, with a glimmering of comprehension. He seemed coming to life, as if sap were trickling from winter-congealment.

Bob Clinton, too, felt the fresh breeze of early spring in his face.
He removed his spectacles.

"The first thing I knew," Fran said, resuming her private conversation with Jakey, "I had a mother, but no father—not that he was dead, oh, bless you, he was alive enough—but before my birth he deserted mother. Uncle turned us out of the house. Did we starve, that deserted mother and her little baby? I don't look starved, do I? Pshaw! If a woman without a cent to her name, and ten pounds in her arms can make good, what about a big strong boy like you with a mother to smile every time he hits the mark? And you'd better believe we got more than a living out of life. Mother taught me geography and history and the Revolutionary War—you know history's one thing, and the Revolutionary War is another —and every lesson she gave me was soaked with love till it was nearly as sweet as her own brave eyes. Maybe I wouldn't have liked it, if I'd had to study on a hard bench in a stuffy room with the world shut out, and a lid put on my voice—but anything's good that's got a mother in it. And tell these gentlemen

you're sorry for punching that boy."

"Sorr'," muttered Jakey shamefacedly.

"I am glad to hear it," Abbott exclaimed heartily. "You can take your cap to go, Jakey."

"Lemme stay," Jakey pleaded, not budging an inch. Fran lifted her face above the tousled head to look at Abbott; she sucked in her cheeks and made a triumphant oval of her mouth. Then she seemed to forget the young man's presence.

"But when mother died, real trouble began. It was always hard work, while she lived, but hard work isn't trouble, la, no, trouble's just an empty heart! Well, sir, when I read about how good Mr. Hamilton Gregory is, and how much he gives away—to folks he never sees—here I came. But I don't seem to belong to anybody, Jakey, I'm outside of everything. People wouldn't care if I blew away with the dead leaves, and maybe I will, some fine morning—maybe they'll go up to my room and call, 'Fran! Fran!'—and there'll be no Fran. Oh, oh, how happy they'll be *then!* But you have a home and a mother, Jakey, and a place in the world, so I say 'Hurrah!' because you belong to somebody, and, best of all, you're not a girl, but a boy to strike out straight from the shoulder."

Jakey was dissolved; tears burst their confines.

One may shout oneself hoarse at the delivery of a speech which, if served upon printed page, would never prompt the reader to cast his hat to the ceiling. No mere print under bold head-lines did Abbott read, but rather the changing lights and shadows in great black eyes. It was marvelous how Fran could project past experiences upon the screen of the listener's perception. At her, "When mother died," Abbott saw the girl weeping beside the death-bed. When she sighed, "I don't belong to anybody," the school-director felt like crying, "Then belong to me!" But it was when she spoke of blowing away with the dead leaves—looking so pathetic and so full of elfish witchery—that the impression was deepest. It almost seemed possible that she might fade and fade to an autumn leaf, and float out the window, and be lost— Clinton had an odd impulse to hold her, lest she vanish.

Fran now completed her work. She rose from the immovable Jakey and came over to Abbott Ashton, with meekly folded hands.

He found the magic of the moonlight-hour returning. She had mellowed— glowed—softened—womanized—Abbott could not find the word for it. She quivered with an exquisiteness not to be defined—a something in hair, or flesh, or glory of eye, or softness of lips, altogether lacking in his physical being, but eagerly desired.

"Professor Ashton," she spoke seriously, "I have been horrid. I might have known that school is merely a place where young people crawl into books to worm themselves from lid to lid, swallowing all that comes in the way. But I'd never been to school, and I imagined it a place where a child was helped to develop itself. I thought teachers were trying to show the pupils the best way to be what they were going to be. I've been disappointed, but that's not your fault; you are just a system. If a boy is to be a blacksmith after he's grown, and if a girl in the same class is to be a music-teacher, or a milliner, both must learn about *a-b-c* and *d-e-f*. So I'm going away for good, because, of course, I couldn't afford to waste my time in this house. I know the names of the bones and the distances of the planets are awfully nice, but I'm more interested in Fran."

"But, Fran," Abbott exclaimed impulsively, "don't you see that you are holding up ignorance as a virtue? Can you afford to despise knowledge in this civilized age? You should want to know facts just because— well, just because they are facts."

"But I don't seem to, at all," Fran responded mildly. "No, I'm not making fun of education when I find fault with your school, any more than I show irreverence to my mother's God when I question what some people call 'religion'. I want to find the connection—looks like it's lost—the connection between life and—everything else. It's the connection to life that makes facts of any value to me; and it's only in its connection to life that I'd give a pin for all the religion on earth."

"I don't understand," Abbott faltered.

She unfolded her hands, and held them up in a quaint little gesture of aspiration. "No, because it isn't in a book. I feel lost—so out in space. I only ask for a place in the universe—to belong to somebody…"

"But," said Abbott, "you already belong to somebody, since Mr. Gregory has taken you into his home and he is one of the best men that ever—"

"Oh, let's go home," cried Fran impatiently. "Let's all of us skip out of this chalky old basement-smelly

place, and breathe the pure air of life."

She darted toward the door, then looked back. Sadness had vanished from her face, to give place to a sudden glow. The late afternoon sun shone full upon her, and she held her lashes apart, quite unblinded by its intensity. She seemed suddenly illumined, not only from without, but from within.

Abbott seized his hat. Robert Clinton had already snatched up his. Jakey squeezed his cap in an agitated hand. All four hurried out into the hall as if moved by the same spring.

Unluckily, as they passed the hall window, Fran looked out. Her eyes were caught by a group seated on the veranda of the Clinton boarding- house. There were Miss Sapphira Clinton, Miss Grace Noir, and several mothers, sipping afternoon tea. In an instant, Fran had grasped the plot. That cloud of witnesses was banked against the green weather- boarding, to behold her ignominy.

"Mr. Clinton," said Fran, all sweetness, all allurement, "I am going to ask of you a first favor. I left my hat up in Miss Bull's room and—"

"I will get it," said Abbott promptly.

"Lem *me!*" Jakey pleaded, with fine admiration.

"Well, I rather guess not!" cried Bob. "Think I'll refuse Fran's first request?" He sped upstairs, uncommonly light of foot.

"Now," whispered Fran wickedly, "let's run off and leave him."

"I'm with you!" Abbott whispered boyishly.

They burst from the building like a storm, Fran laughing musically, Abbott laughing joyously, Jakey laughing loudest of all. They sallied down the front walk under the artillery fire of hostile eyes from the green veranda. They continued merry. Jakey even swaggered, fancying himself a part of it; he regretted his short trousers.

When Robert Clinton overtook them, he was red and breathless, but Fran's beribboned hat was clutched triumphantly in his hand. It was he who first discovered the ambuscade. He suddenly remembered, looked across the street, then fell, desperately wounded. The shots would have passed unheeded over Abbott's head, had not Fran called his attention to the ambuscade.

"It's a good thing," she said innocently, "that you're not holding my hand—" and she nodded toward the boarding-house. Abbott looked, and turned for one despairing glance at Bob; the latter was without sign of life.

"What shall we do?" inquired Fran, as they halted ridiculously. "If we run for it, it'll make things worse."

"Oh, Lord, yes!" groaned Bob; *"don't* make a bolt!"

Abbott pretended not to understand. "Come on, Fran, I shall go home with you." His fighting blood was up. In his face was no surrender, no, not even to Grace Noir. "Come," he persisted, with dignity.

"How jolly!" Fran exclaimed. "Shall we go through the grove?—that's the longest way."

"Then let us go that way," responded Abbott stubbornly.

"Abbott," the school-director warned, "you'd better come on over to my place—I'm going there this instant to—to get a cup of tea. It'll be best for you, old fellow, you listen to me, now—you need a little er —a—some—a little stimulant."

"No," Abbott returned definitely. He had done nothing wrong, and he resented the accusing glances from across the way. "No, I'm going with Fran."

"And don't you bother about him," Fran called after the retreating chairman of the board, "he'll have stimulant enough."

CHAPTER XI

THE NEW BRIDGE AT MIDNIGHT

It was almost time for summer vacation. Like all conscientious superintendents of public schools, Abbott Ashton found the closing week especially fatiguing. Examinations were nerve-testing, and correction of examination-papers called for late hours over the lamp. At such times, when most needing sleep, one sleeps least.

One strolls, at hours devoted by others to slumber. Abbott Ashton, for instance, had fallen into the reprehensible habit of bolting from the boarding-house, after the last paper had been graded, no matter how late the night, and making his way rapidly from town as if to bathe his soul in country solitude. Like all reprehensible habits this one was presently to revenge itself by getting the "professor" into trouble.

One beautiful moonlight night, he was nearing the suburbs, when he made a discovery. The discovery was twofold: first, that the real cause of his nightly wanderings was not altogether a weariness of mental toil; second, that he had, for some time, been trying to escape from the thought of Fran. He had not known this. He had simply run, asking no questions. It was when he suddenly discovered Fran in the flesh, as she slipped along a crooked alley, gliding in shadows, that the cause of much sleeplessness was made tangible.

Abbott was greatly disturbed. Why should Fran, be stealthily darting down side-alleys at midnight? The wonder suggested its corollary—why was he running as from some intangible enemy? He realized that the Fran-thought had been working in the under-layers of his mental processes all the time his upper crust had busied itself with rehearsals of "Beyond the Alps lies Italy" and the determination of Hamlet's madness. But now was no time for introspection, and he set himself the task of solving the new mystery. As Fran merged from the mouth of the alley, Abbott dived into its bowels, but when he reached the next street, no Fran was to be seen.

Had she darted into one of the scattered cabins that composed the fringe of Littleburg? At the mere thought, he felt a nameless shrinking of the heart. Surely not. But could she possibly, however fleet of foot, have rounded the next corner before his coming into the light? Abbott sped along the street that he might know the truth, though he realized that the less he saw of Fran the better. However, the thought of her being alone in the outskirts of the village, most assuredly without her guardian's knowledge, seemed to call him to duty. Call or no call, he went.

It seemed to him a long time before he reached the corner. He darted around it—yonder sped Fran like a thin shadow racing before the moon. She had taken the direction of the open fields, and so swiftly did she run, that the sound of his pursuit never reached her ears. She ran. Abbott ran. It was like a foot-race without spectators.

At last she reached the bridge spanning a ravine in whose far depths murmured a little stream. The bridge was new, built to replace the footbridge upon which Abbott and Fran had stood on the night of the tent-meeting. Was it possible that the superintendent of instruction was about to venture a second time across this ravine with the same girl, under the same danger of misunderstanding, revealed by similar glory of moonlight? One may do even that, when duty calls—for surely it was a duty to warn this imprudent child to go home. Conscience whispered that it would not be enough simply to warn; he should escort her to Hamilton Gregory's very door, that he might know she had been rescued from the wide white night; and his conscience was possibly upheld by the knowledge that a sudden advent of a Miss Sapphira was morally impossible.

Fran's back had been toward him all the time. She was still unaware of his presence, as she paused in the middle of the bridge, and with critical eye sought a position mathematically the same from either hand-rail. Standing there, she drew a package from her bosom, hastily seated herself upon the boards, and, oblivious of surroundings, bent over the package as it rested in her lap.

Was she reading some love-sick romance by moonlight, or—or possibly a letter? Abbott, without pause, hurried up. His feet sounded on the bridge.

Fran was speaking aloud, and, on that account, did not hear him, as he came up behind her. "Grace Noir," she was saying—"Abbott Ashton—Bob Clinton—Hamilton Gregory—Mrs. Gregory—Simon Jefferson—Mrs. Jefferson—Miss Sapphira—Fran—the Devil—" She seemed to be calling the roll of her acquaintances. Was she reading a list from the package?

Abbott trod noisily on the fresh pine floor.

Fran swiftly turned, and the moonbeams revealed a flush, yet she did not attempt to rise. "Why didn't you answer, when you heard your name called?" she asked with a good deal of composure.

"Fran!" Abbott exclaimed. "Here all alone at midnight—*all alone!* Is it possible?"

"No, it *isn't* possible," Fran returned satirically, "for I have company."

Abbott warmly urged her to hasten back home; at the same time he drew nearer and discovered that her lap was covered with playing-cards. His advice to her was all it should have been; the most careful father could have found no fault with his helpful words—all the same, he didn't understand about those cards.

Fran, looking down, listened with profound respectfulness, and when he had finished, she said, "It is so nice of you to care about me and worry over what people will think, so I'll go home with you just as soon as I tell the fortune of the cards. It won't take but a minute, and I'm awfully glad you came, for it was pretty scary here alone, I tell *you!* The moon kept making big eyes at me, and the brook sounded like a death-call down there in the dark."

"But you mustn't stay here," he said imperatively. "Let us go at once."

"Just as soon as I tell the fortunes. Of course I wouldn't go to all this trouble for nothing. Now look. This card is Fran—the Queen of Hearts. This one is Simon Jefferson—and this one is Bob. And you—but it's no use telling all of them. Now; we want to see who's going to marry."

Abbott spoke in his most authoritative tone: "Fran! Get up and come with me before somebody sees you here. This is not only ridiculous, it's wrong and dreadfully imprudent."

Fran looked up with flashing eyes. "I won't!" she cried. "Not till I've told the fortunes. I'm not the girl to go away until she's done what she came to do." Then she added mildly, "Abbott, I just had to say it in that voice, so you'd know I meant it. Don't be cross with me."

She shuffled the cards.

"But why must you stay out *here* to do it?" he groaned.

"Because this is a new bridge. I'd hate to be a professor, and not know that it has to be in the middle of a new bridge, at midnight, over running water, in the moonlight. Now you keep still and be nice; I want to see who's going to get married. Here is Grace Noir, and here is Fran..."

"And where am I?" asked Abbott, in an awed voice, as he bent down.

Fran wouldn't tell him.

He bent lower. "Oh, I see, I see!" he cried. *"This* is me—" he drew a card from the pack—"the King of Hearts." He held it up triumphantly. "Well. And you are the Queen of Hearts, you said."

"Maybe I am," said Fran, rather breathlessly, "but whose hearts are we king and queen of? That's what I want to find out." And she showed her teeth at him.

"We can draw and see," he suggested, sinking upon one knee. "And yet, since you're the queen and I'm the king, it must be each other's hearts—"

He stopped abruptly at sight of her crimsoned cheeks.

"That doesn't always follow," Fran told him hastily; "not by *any* means. For here are other queens. See the Queen of Spades? Maybe you'll get *her*. Maybe you want *her*. You see, she either goes to you, or to the next card."

"But I don't want any Queen of Spades," Abbott declared. He drew the next card, and exclaimed dramatically, "Saved, saved! Here's Bob. Give her to Bob Clinton."

"Oh, Abbott!" Fran exclaimed, looking at him with starlike eyes and roselike cheeks, making the most fascinating picture he had ever beheld at midnight under a silver moon. *"Do* you mean that? Remember you're on a new bridge over running water."

Abbott paused uneasily. She looked less like a child than he had ever seen her. Her body was very slight—but her face was...It is marvelous how much of a woman's seriousness was to be found in this

girl. She seemed inclined to give her words about the foolish cards a woman's significance. He rose with the consciousness that for a moment he had rather forgotten himself.

He reminded her gravely—"We are talking about cards—just cards."

"No," said Fran, not stirring, "we are talking about Grace Noir. You say you don't want her; you've already drawn yourself out. That leaves her to poor Bob—he'll have to take her, unless the Joker gets the lady—the Joker is named the Devil…So the game isn't interesting any more." She threw down all the cards, and looked up, beaming. "My! but I'm glad you came."

He was fascinated and could not move, though as convinced as at the beginning that they should not linger thus. There might be fatal consequences; but the charm of the little girl seemed to temper this chill knowledge to the shorn lamb. He temporized: "Why don't you go on with your fortune-telling, little girl?"

"I just wanted to find out if Grace Noir is going to get you," she said candidly; "it doesn't matter what becomes of her. Were you ever on this bridge before?"

"Fran, Miss Grace is one of the best friends I have, and—and everybody admires her. The fact that you don't like her, shows that you are not all you ought to be."

"What does the fact that she doesn't like me show?"

"It shows that you ought to be changed. It was a fatal mistake when you left school, but it's worse for you to refuse persistently to go to church."

"And she told you that, did she?"

"I want your higher nature to be developed. Take Miss Grace for your model—I know you have noble impulses; grow up to be a noble woman— try to be like her."

He was sorry to strike these necessary blows, she seemed so pitifully defenseless as he watched the motionless figure at his feet. Fran's drooping head hid her face. Was she contrite, or mocking? Presently she looked up, her expression that of grave cheerfulness. "Now you've said what you thought you had to say," she remarked. "So *that's* over. Were you ever on this bridge before?"

Abbott was offended. "No."

"Good, good!" with vivacious enthusiasm. "Both of us must cross it at the same time and make a wish. Help me up—quick."

She reached up both hands, and Abbott lifted her to her feet.

"Whenever you cross a new bridge," she explained, "you must make a wish. It'll come true. Won't you do it, Abbott?"

"Of course. What a superstitious little Nonpareil! Do you hold hands?"

"Honest hands—" She held out both of hers. "Come on then. What are you going to wish, Abbott? But no, you mustn't tell till we're across. Oh, I'm just dying to know! Have you made up your mind, yet?"

"Yes, Fran," he answered indulgently, "it's something always in my mind."

"About Grace Noir?"

"Nothing whatever about Miss Grace Noir."

"All right. I'm glad. Say this:

"'Slow we go,
Two in a row'—

"Don't talk or anything, just wish, oh, wish with *all* your might—

"'With all my mind and all my heart,
While we're together and after we part'—

"say that."

Abbott repeated gravely:

"'With all my mind and all my heart,
While we're together and after we part.'

"What are you going to wish, Fran?"

"Sh-h-h! Mum!" whispered Fran, opening her eyes wide. With slow steps they walked side by side, shoulder to shoulder, four hands clasped. Fran's great dark eyes were set fixedly upon space as they solemnly paraded beneath the watchful moon. As Abbott watched her, the witchery of the night stole into his blood. Beneath them, the brook murmured drowsily in its dark bed. Beyond, stretched the meadows, and, far away, the woods. Before them, and behind, ran the rutted road, hard and gleaming. Over them, the moon showered its profusion of silver beams. Within them were—wishes.

The last plank was crossed. "Now!" Fran cried breathlessly, "what did you wish?" Her body was quivering, her face glowing.

"That I might succeed," Abbott answered.

"Oh!" said Fran. "My! That was like a cold breath. Just wishing to be great, and famous, and useful, and rich!"

Abbott laughed as light-heartedly as if the road were not calling them away from solitudes, "Well, what did you wish, Fran?"

"That you might always be my friend, while we're together, and after we part."

"It doesn't take a new bridge to make that come true," he declared.

She looked at him solemnly. "Do you understand the responsibilities of being a friend? A friend has to assume obligations, just as when a man's elected to office, he must represent his party and his platform."

"I'll stand for you!" Abbott cried earnestly.

"Will you? Then I'm going to tell you all about myself—ready to be surprised? Friends ought to know each other. In the first place, I am eighteen years old, and in the second place I am a professional lion-trainer, and in the third place my father is—but friends don't have to know each other's fathers. Besides, maybe that's enough to start with."

"Yes," said Abbott, "it is." He paused, but she could not guess his emotions, for his face showed nothing but a sort of blankness. "I should like to take this up seriatim. You tell me you are eighteen years old?"

"—And have had lots of experience."

"Your lion-training: has it been theoretical, or—"

"Mercenary," Fran responded; "real lions, real bars, real spectators, real pay-days."

"But, Fran," said Abbott helplessly, "I don't understand."

"But you're going to, before I'm done with you. I tell you, I'm a show-girl, a lion-tamer, a *Jungler.* I'm the famous Fran Nonpareil, and my carnival company has showed in most of the towns and cities of the United States. I guess you feel funny to have such a celebrated person talking to you, but in ordinary life, great people aren't different. It's when I'm in my blue silks and gold stars and crimson sashes, kissing my hands to the audience, that I'm the real princess."

Though she spoke lightly, she was well aware of the shock she had imparted. For a time her face had never looked so elfish, but in the silence that ensued, the light faded from her eyes.

Abbott was unable to analyze his real emotions, and his one endeavor was to hide his perplexity. He had always treated her as if she were older than the town supposed, hence the revelation of her age did not so much matter; but lion-training was so remote from conventions that it seemed in a way almost uncanny. It seemed to isolate Fran, to set her coldly apart from the people of his world.

"I'm going home," Fran said abruptly.

He followed her mechanically, too absorbed in her revelation to think of the cards left forgotten on the bridge. From their scene of good wishes, Fran went first, head erect, arms swinging defiantly; Abbott followed, not knowing in the least what to say, or even what to think.

The moon had not been laughing at them long, before Fran looked back over her shoulder and said, as if he had spoken, "Still, I'd like for you to know about it."

He quickened his step to regain her side, but was oppressed by an odd sense of the abnormal.

"Although," she added indistinctly, "it doesn't matter." They walked on in silence until, after prolonged hesitation, he told her quietly that he would like to hear all she felt disposed to tell.

She looked at him steadily: "Can you dilute a few words with the water of your imagination, to cover a life? I'll speak the words, if you have the imagination."

As he looked into her eyes, all sense of the abnormal disappeared. "I have the imagination, Fran," he exclaimed impulsively, "if it is *your* life."

"In spite of the lions?" she asked, almost sternly.

Abbott rested a hand upon each of her shoulders, and studied her face. The moonlight was lost in the depths of the unfaltering eyes, and there came upon him a surging tide as from the depths of the unknown, sweeping away such artificial barriers as the mind prepares against all great shocks, or surprises.

"You needn't tell me a word," Abbott said, removing his hands. "I know all that one need know; it's written in your face, a story of sweet innocence and brave patience."

"But I want you to know."

"Good!" he replied with a sudden smile. "Tell the story, then; if you were an Odyssey, you couldn't be too long."

"The first thing I remember is waking up to feel the car jerked, or stopped, or started, and Seeing lights flash past the windows— lanterns of the brakemen, or lamps of some town, dancing along the track. The sleeping-car was home—the only home I knew. All night long there was the groaning of the wheels, the letting off of steam, the calls of the men. Bounder Brothers had their private train, and mother and I lived in our Pullman car. I don't know how old I was when I found out that everybody didn't live on wheels,—that most children had homes that didn't move around, with neighbors and relations. After a while I knew that folks stared at us because we were different from others. We were show-people. Then the thing was to look like you didn't know, or didn't care, how much people stared. After that, I found out that I had no father; he'd deserted mother, and her uncle had turned her out of doors for marrying against his wishes, and she'd have starved if it hadn't been for the show-people."

"Dear Fran!" whispered Abbott tenderly.

"Mother had gone to Chicago, hoping for a position in some respectable office, but they didn't want a typewriter who wasn't a stenographer. It was winter—and mother had me—I was so little and bad!…In a cheap lodging-house, mother got to know La Gonizetti, and she persuaded mother to wait with her for the season to open up, then go with Bounder Brothers; they were wintering in Chicago. It was such a kind of life as mother had never dreamed of, but it was more convenient than starving, and she thought it would give her a chance to find father—that traveling, all over the country. La Gonizetti was a lion-tamer, and that's what mother learned, and those two were the only ones who could go inside Samson's cage. The life was awfully hard, but she got to like it, and everybody was kind to us, and money came pouring in, and she was always hoping to run across a clue to my father—and never did."

She paused, but at the pressure of Abbott's sympathetic hand, she went on with renewed courage:

"When I was big enough, I wore a tiny black skirt, and a red coat with shiny buttons, and I beat the drum in the carnival band. You ought to have seen me—so little.…Abbott, you can't imagine how little I was! We had about a dozen small shows in our company, fortune-tellers, minstrels, magic wonders, and all that—and the band had to march from one tent to the next, and stand out in front and play, to get the crowd in a bunch, so the free exhibition could work on their nerves. And I'd beat away, in my red coat…and there were always the strange faces, staring, staring—but I was *so* little! Sometimes they would smile at me, but mother had taught me never to speak to any one, but to wear a glazed look like this—"

"How frightfully cold!" Abbott shivered. Then he laughed, and so did Fran. They had entered Littleburg. He added wickedly, "And how dreadfully near we are getting to your home."

Fran gurgled. "Wouldn't Grace Noir just die if she could see us!"

That sobered Abbott; considering his official position, it seemed high time for reflection.

Fran resumed abruptly. "But I never really liked it because what I wanted was a home—to belong to somebody. Living that way in a traveling-car, going to sleep in the rattle of pulling down tent-seats and the roar of wild animals, and waking up with the hot sun glaring into your eyes, and the smell of weeds coming in through your berth- window…it made me want to be fastened to the ground, like a tree. Then I got to hating the bold stare of people's eyes, and their foolish gaping mouths, I hated being always on exhibition with every gesture watched, as if I'd been one of the trained dogs. I hated the public. I wanted to get away from the world—clear away from everybody…like I am now…with you. Isn't it great!"

"Mammoth!" Abbott declared, watering her words with liberal imagination.

"I must talk fast, or the Gregory house will be looming up at us. Mother didn't want me to like that life, maybe that was another reason—she was always talking about how we'd settle down, some day, in a place of our own where we'd know the people on the other side of the fence—and quit being wonders. But looks like I can't manage it"

"Some people are born wonders," remarked Abbott.

"Yes," Fran acquiesced modestly, "I guess I was. Mother taught me all she knew, though she hated books; she made herself think she was only in the show life till she could make a little more—always just a little more—she really loved it, you see. But I loved the books— study—anything that wasn't the show. It was kind of friendly when I began feeding Samson."

"Poor little Nonpareil!" murmured Abbott wistfully.

"And often when the show was being unloaded, I'd be stretched out in our sleeper, with a school-book pressed close to the cinder-specked window, catching the first light. When the mauls were pounding away at the tent-pins, maybe I'd hunt a seat on some cage, if it had been drawn up under a tree, or maybe it'd be the ticket-wagon, or even the stake-pile—there you'd see me studying away for dear life, dressed in a plain little dress, trying to look like ordinary folks. Such a queer little chap, I was—and always trying to pretend that I wasn't! You'd have laughed to see me."

"Laughed at you!" cried Abbott indignantly. "Indeed I shouldn't."

"No?" exclaimed Fran, patting his arm impulsively.

"Dear little wonder!" he returned conclusively.

"I must tell you about one time," she continued gaily. "We were in New Orleans at the Mardi Gras, and I was expected to come into the ring riding Samson—not the vicious old lion, but cub—that was long after my days of the drum and the red coat, bless you! I was a lion-tamer, now, nearly thirteen years old, if you'll believe me. Well! And what was I saying—you keep looking so friendly, you make me forget myself. Goodness, Abbott, it's so much fun talking to you…I've never mentioned all this to one soul in this town…Well—oh, yes; I was to have come into the ring, riding Samson. Everybody was waiting for me. The band nearly blew itself black in the face. And what do you think was the matter?"

"Did Samson balk?"

"No, it wasn't that. I was lying on the cage-floor, with my head on Samson—Samson the Second made *such* a gorgeous and animated pillow! —and I was learning geology. I'd just found out that the world wasn't made in seven United States days, and it was such surprising news that I'd forgotten all about cages and lions and tents—if you could have seen me lying there—if you just could!"

"But I can!" Abbott declared. "Your long black hair is mingled with his tawny mane, and your cheeks are blooming—"

"And my feet are crossed," cried Fran.

"And your feet are crossed; and those little hands hold up the book," Abbott swiftly sketched in the details; "and your bosom is rising and falling, and your lips are parted—like now—showing perfect teeth —"

"Dressed in my tights and fluffy lace and jewels," Fran helped, "with bare arms and stars all in my hair…But the end came to everything when—when mother died. Her last words were about my father—how she hoped some day I'd meet him, and tell him she had forgiven. Mother sent me to her half-uncle. My! but that was mighty unpleasant!" Fran shook her head vigorously. "He began telling me about how mother had done wrong in marrying secretly, and he threw it up to me and I just told him…But he's dead, now. I had to go back to the show—there wasn't any other place. But a few months ago I was of age, and I came into Uncle Ephraim's property, because I was the only living relation he had, so he

couldn't help my getting it. I'll bet he's mad, now, that he didn't make a will! When he said that mother —it don't matter what he said—I just walked out of his door, that time, with my head up high like this… Oh, goodness, we're here."

They stood before Hamilton Gregory's silent house.

"Good night," Fran said hastily. "It's a mistake to begin a long story on a short road. My! But *wasn't* that a short road, though!"

"Sometime, you shall finish that story, Fran. I know of a road much longer than the one we've taken—we might try it some day, if you say so."

"I do say so. What road is it?"

They had paused at the front gate, Fran in the yard, Abbott outside. It was dark under the heavy sugar-maples that guarded the gate; they could not see beyond each other's faces. Abbott felt strange, as if he knew no more about what he might do, or say, than if he had been another man. He had spoken of a long road without definite purpose, yet there was a glimmering perception of the reality, as he showed by saying tremulously:

"This is the beginning of it—"

He bent down, as if to take her in his arms.

But Fran drew back, perhaps with a blush that the darkness concealed, certainly with a little laugh. "I'm afraid I'd get lost on that road," she murmured, "for I don't believe you know the way very well, yourself."

She sped lightly to the house, unlocked the door, and vanished.

CHAPTER XII

GRACE CAPTURES THE OUTPOSTS

The next evening there was choir practice at the Walnut Street church. Abbott Ashton, hesitating to make his nightly plunge into the dust- clouds of learning, paused in the vestibule to take a peep at Grace. It always rested him to look at her; he meant to drink her in, as it were, to cool his parched soul, then make a dash at his stack of examination-papers. He knew she never missed a choir practice, for though she could neither sing, nor play the organ, she thought it her duty to set an example of regular attendance that might be the means of bringing those who could do one or the other.

Abbott was not disappointed; but he was surprised to see Mrs. Jefferson in her wheel-chair at the end of the pew occupied by the secretary, while between them sat Mrs. Gregory. His surprise became astonishment on discovering Fran and Simon Jefferson in the choir loft, slyly whispering and nibbling candy, with the air of soldiers off duty—for the choir was in the throes of a solo.

Abbott, as if hypnotized by what he had seen, slowly entered the auditorium. Fran's keen eyes discovered him, and her face showed elfish mischief. Grace, following Fran's eyes, found the cause of the odd smile, and beckoned to Abbott. Hamilton Gregory, following Grace's glance—for he saw no one but her at the practices, since she inspired him with deepest fervor—felt suddenly as if he had lost something; he had often experienced the same sensation on seeing Grace approached by some unattached gentleman.

Grace motioned to Abbott to sit beside her, with a concentration of attention that showed her purpose of reaching a definite goal unsuspected by the other. On account of the solo, there were the briefest of whispered greetings to Mrs. Gregory, and merely a wave to old Mrs. Jefferson.

"I'm so glad Fran has taken a place in the choir," Abbott whispered to Grace. "And look at Simon Jefferson—who'd have thought it!"

Grace looked at Simon Jefferson; she also looked at Fran, but her compressed lips and reproving eye expressed none of Abbott's gladness. However, she responded with—"I am so glad *you* are here, Professor Ashton, for I'm in trouble, and I can't decide which way it is my duty to turn. Will you help me? I am going to trust you—it is a matter relating to Mr. Gregory."

Abbott was pleased that she should think him competent to advise her respecting her duty; at the same time he regretted that her confidence related to Mr. Gregory. It came vaguely to his mind that it was always like that—which was natural, though, since he was her employer.

"Professor Ashton," she said softly, "does my position as hired secretary to Mr. Gregory carry with it the obligation to warn him of any misconduct in his household?"

The solo was dying away, and, sweet and low, it fell from heaven like manna upon his soul, blending divinely with the secretary's voice. Her expression "hired" sounded like a tragic note—to think of one so beautiful, so meek, so surrounded by mellow hymn-notes, being hired! He had lost the vision of his career in mists of an attenuated Grace Noir. As the material skirts of the spiritual Grace Noir brushed his leg, it was as if, for a moment, his veins ran muslin and pink ribbons.

"You hesitate to advise me, before you know all," she said, "and you are right. In a moment the choir will be singing louder, and we can all talk together. Mrs. Gregory should be consulted, too."

Grace, conscious of doing all that one could in consulting Mrs. Gregory, "too", looked toward the choir loft, and smiled into Hamilton Gregory's eyes. How his baton, inspired by that smile, cut magic runes in the air! An anthem rose buoyantly, covering the ensuing conversation with its mantle of sound.

"Mrs. Gregory," Grace said in a low voice, "I suppose Professor Ashton is so surprised at seeing you in church—it has been more than five months, hasn't it?…that I'm afraid he isn't thinking about what I'm saying." She paused as if to ask why the other was there,—as if she were an interloper, who, having by absence forfeited her rights, now came in her arrogance to claim them. Not only Grace's tone, but her very attitude seemed to ask, "Why is this woman here?"

Mrs. Gregory could not help feeling in the way, because her husband seemed to share Grace's feeling. Instinctively she turned to her mother and laid her hand on the invalid's arm.

"They ain't bothering me, Lucy," said the old lady, alertly. "I can't hear their noise, and when I shut my eyes I can't see their motions."

"I have something to tell you both," Grace said solemnly. "Last night, I couldn't sleep, and that made me sensitive to noises. I thought I heard some one slipping from the house just as the clock struck half-past eleven. It seemed incredible, for I knew if it were any one, it was that Fran, and I didn't think even she would do *that."*

It was as if Abbott had suddenly raised a window in a raw wind. His temperature descended. The other's manner of saying "That Fran!" obscured his glass of the future.

Mrs. Gregory said quickly, "Fran leave the house at half-past eleven?
Impossible."

Grace smiled unpleasantly. Believing Fran, possibly an impostor, certainly a disturbing element, it was her duty to drive her from her employer's house; but however pure and noble her disapproval, Grace could not speak of the orphan without a tone or look suggesting mere spite.

"How do you know," Abbott asked, "that Fran left the house at such a time of the night?" The question was unfair since it suggested denial, but his feeling for Fran seemed to call for unfairness to Grace.

"I will tell you," Grace responded, with the distinctness of one in power. "At the time, I told myself that even Fran would not do *that.* But, a long time afterward, I heard another sound, from the yard. I went to my window. I looked out. The moon was bright, but there was a very dark shadow about the front gate. I heard voices. One was that of Fran. The other was the voice of—" her tone vibrated in its intensity—"the voice of a man!"

"It was not Fran's voice," Mrs. Gregory declared earnestly.

"What man was it?" Abbott inquired, rather resentfully.

"I do not know. I wish now, that I had called out," responded Grace, paying no heed to Mrs. Gregory. "That is where I made my mistake. The man got away. Fran came running into the house, and closed the door as softly as she could—after she'd unlocked it *from the outside!* I concluded it would be best to

wait till morning, before I said a word. So this morning, before breakfast, I strolled in the yard, trying to decide what I had better do. I went to the gate, and there on the grass—what do you suppose I found?"

Abbott was bewildered. What serious consequences was Grace about to evolve from the bridge-romance?

Mrs. Gregory listened, pale with apprehension.

"It was a *card*," Grace said, with awful significance, "a gambling card! As long as I have lived in the house, nobody ever dared to bring a card there. Mrs. Gregory will tell you the same. But that Fran.... She had been playing cards out there at midnight—and with a man!"

"I can not think so," said Mrs. Gregory firmly.

"After making up my mind what to do," continued Grace evenly, "I took her aside. I told her what I had seen and heard. I gave her back her card. But how can we be sure she will not do it again? That is what troubles me. Oughtn't I to tell Mr. Gregory, so a scandal can be avoided?"

Abbott looked blankly at Fran, who was singing with all her might. She caught his look, and closed her eyes. Abbott asked weakly, "What did she say?"

Grace answered, "She denied it, of course—said she hadn't been playing cards with anybody, hadn't dropped the card I found, and wouldn't even admit that she'd been with a man. If I tell Mr. Gregory about her playing cards with a man at that hour, I don't believe he will think he ought to keep her longer, even if she *does* claim to be his friend's daughter."

"But you tell us," Mrs. Gregory interposed swiftly, "that she said she hadn't been playing cards."

"She said!" Grace echoed unpleasantly, *"she said!"*

"That card you found," began Abbott guiltily, "was it the King of Hearts?" Possibly he had dropped it from his pocket when leaning over the gate to—But why had he leaned over the gate?

Grace coldly answered, "I do not know one card from another."

"Let me try to describe it."

"I hope *you* can not describe the card I found," said Grace, the presentiment that she was on the eve of discoveries giving her eyes a starlike directness. Abbott felt himself squirming under the heel of a higher order of being.

"I suspect I dropped that card over the fence," he confessed, "for I had the King of Hearts, and last night, about that time I was standing at the gate—"

"Oh," Grace exclaimed, disagreeably surprised. "I did not know that *you* play cards, Professor Ashton. Do you also attend the dances? I had always thought of you as one of the most faithful members of the Walnut Street church—one who is always there, when you can come—not like *some* members whose names are on the book. Surely you haven't been dancing and playing cards *very long?"*

"Not for a great while," responded Abbott, with the obstinacy of a good conscience wrongfully accused.

The secretary no longer held him under her foot—the last icicle-prick of her tongue had liberated him.

"Only since Fran came, I am sure," she said, feeling him escaping. She looked at him with something like scorn, inspired by righteous indignation that such as he could be influenced by Fran. That look wrought havoc with the halo he had so long blinked at, as it swung above her head.

"Does that mean," he inquired, with a steady look, "that you imagine
Fran has led me into bad habits?"

"I trust the habits are not fixed," rather contemptuously. "I hardly think you mean to desert the church, and lose your position at school, for the sake of—of that Fran."

"I hardly think so, either," returned Abbott. "And now I'd better go to my school-work."

"Fran is imprudent," said Mrs. Gregory, in distress, "but her heart is pure gold. I don't know what all this means, but when I have had a talk with her—"

"Don't go, Professor Ashton," interposed Grace, as he started up, "until you advise me. Shall I tell Mr. Gregory? Or shall I conceal it on the assurances that it will never happen again?"

Abbott seated himself with sudden persuasiveness. "Conceal it, Miss Grace, conceal it!" he urged.

"If you will frankly explain what happened—here before Mrs. Gregory, so she can have the real truth, we will never betray the secret. But if you can not tell everything, I shall feel it my duty—I don't know how Mrs. Gregory feels about it—but *I* must tell Mr. Gregory."

"I would rather wait," said Mrs. Gregory, "and talk to Fran. She will promise me anything. I trust you, Abbott; I know you would never lead my little girl into wrong-doing. She is wild and untrained, and I suspect you were trying to help her, last night. Leave it all to me. I will have a good talk with Fran."

"And," said Abbott eagerly, "if we both solemnly promise—"

Grace bit her lip. His "we" condemned him.

"I don't ask you to hide the affair on my account," he said, holdingup his head. "I don't want Fran put in an unjust light. She isn't to be judged like other people."

"Oh," murmured Grace, "then you think there is more than one standard of right? I don't. There's one God and one Right. No, I can not consent; what might satisfy Mrs. Gregory might not seem best to me. No, Professor, if you feel that you can not explain what I saw, last night, I shall feel obliged to tell Mr. Gregory as soon as the choir practice ends."

"Didn't Fran refuse to tell?" Abbott temporized.

"Yes," was the skilful response; "but her reticence must have been to save you, for the girl never seems ashamed of anything *she* does. I imagine she hated to get you into trouble."

"Miss Grace, you have heard Mrs. Gregory say that she trusts me—and she is Fran's guardian. I ask you to do the same."

"I must consider my conscience."

That answer closed all argument.

"You had better tell her," said Mrs. Gregory, "for she is determined to know."

"I was taking a walk to rest my mind," Abbott said slowly, proceeding as if he would have liked to fight his ground inch by inch, "and it was rather late. I was strolling about Littleburg. Yesterday was a pretty hard day, getting ready for Commencement—my mind was tired out."

"Did you get your mind rested?" Grace permitted herself the slight relaxation of a sarcasm.

"Yes, At last I found myself at the new bridge that leads to the camp- meeting grounds, when ahead of me, there was—I saw Fran. I was much surprised to find her out there, alone."

"I can understand that," said Grace quietly, "for I should have been surprised myself."

Mrs. Gregory turned upon Grace. "Let him go on!" she said with a flash that petrified the secretary.

"When I came up to the bridge, she was sitting there, with some cards —all alone. She had some superstition about trying fortunes on a new bridge at midnight, and that explains the lateness of the hour. So I persuaded her to come home, and that is all."

Mrs. Gregory breathed with relief. "What an odd little darling!" she murmured, smiling.

"What kind of fortune was she telling?" Grace asked.

"Whatever kind the new bridge would give her."

"Oh, then the cards stood for *people,* didn't they! And the card you dropped in the yard was *your* card, of course."

"Of course."

"And did Fran—have a card to represent herself, perhaps?"

"I have told you the story," said Abbott, rising.

"That means she did. Then she wanted to know if you and she would… Mrs. Gregory, I have always felt that Fran has deceived us about her age! She is older than she pretends to be!"

"I believe this concludes our bargain," said Abbott, rising.

Mrs. Gregory was calm. "Miss Grace, Fran told me long ago that she is eighteen years old; she came as a little girl, because she thought we would take her in the more readily, if we believed her a mere child."

"Does Mr. Gregory know that?"

"I haven't told him; I don't know whether Fran has or not."

"You haven't told him!" Grace was speechless. "You knew it, and haven't told him? What ought *I* to do?"

"You ought to keep your promise," Abbott retorted hotly.

"Sitting on that bridge at midnight, alone, telling people's fortunes by cards….Professor Ashton—Mrs. Gregory!" Grace exclaimed, with one of those flashes of inspiration peculiar to her sex, "that Fran *is a show-girl!"*

Abbott started, but said nothing.

Mrs. Gregory rose, and spoke through her mother's ear-trumpet, "Shall we go home, now?"

"That Fran," repeated Grace, "is a show-girl! She is eighteen or nineteen years old, and she is a show-girl!"

"Wouldn't it be best for you to ask her?"

"Ask her? *Her? No,* I ask you!"

"Let me push the chair," said Abbott, stepping to Mrs. Gregory's side.
He read in the troubled face that she had known this secret, also.

The secretary gazed at him with a far-away look, hardly conscious that he was beating retreat, so absorbed was she in this revelation. Now, indeed, it was certain that Fran, the girl of eighteen or nineteen, Fran, the show-girl, was an impostor! Her age proved that Mr. Gregory must have known her "father" when he was attending college in Springfield, whereas, believing her much younger, it had all the time been taken for granted that they had been companions in New York.

It would be necessary for some one to go to Springfield to make investigations. Grace had for ever alienated Abbott Ashton, but there was always Robert Clinton. He would obey her every wish; Robert Clinton should go. And when Robert had returned with a full history of Hamilton Gregory's school-days at Springfield, and those of Gregory's intimate friend, Fran, with the proofs of her conspiracy spread before her, should be driven forth, never again to darken the home of the philanthropist.

CHAPTER XIII

ALLIANCE WITH ABBOTT

For the most part, that was a silent walk to Hamilton Gregory's. Abbott Ashton pushed the wheel-chair, and it was only Mrs. Jefferson, ignorant of what had taken place, who commented on the bright moon, and the relief of rose-scented breezes after the musty auditorium of Walnut Street church.

"They were bent and determined on Fran going to choir practice," the old lady told Abbott, "so Lucy and I went along to encourage her, for they say she has a fine voice, and they want all the good singing they can have at Uncle Tobe Fuller's funeral. Uncle Tobe, he didn't know one tune from another, but now that he's dead, he knows 'em all—for he was a good man. I despise big doings at funerals, but I

expect to go, and as I can't hear the solos, nor the preacher working up feelings, all I'll have to do will be to sit and look at the coffin."

"Mother," said Mrs. Gregory, "you are not cheerful to-night."

"No," the other responded, "I think it's from sitting so long by the Whited Sepulcher."

Mrs. Gregory spoke into the trumpet, with real distress—"Mother, mother! Abbott won't understand you; he doesn't know you are using a figure of speech."

"Yes," said the old lady, "Number Thirteen, if there's anything unlucky in figures."

Abbott effected diversion. "Mrs. Gregory, I'm glad Miss Noir agreed to say nothing about her discoveries, for the only harm in them is what people might imagine. I was pretty uneasy, at first; of course I knew that if she felt she *ought* to tell it, she would. I never knew anybody so conscientious."

There was a pause, then Mrs. Gregory responded, "She will not tell."

Abbott had seen them safely into the house, and had reached the gate on his departure, when Fran came running up. In pleased surprise he opened the gate for her, but she stopped in the outside shadow, and he paused within the yard.

"Fran!" he exclaimed with pleasure. "Is the practice ended?"

She made no response.

"Fran, what's the matter?"

Silence.

Abbott was both perplexed and hurt. "Remember what we said on the new bridge," he urged; "we're friends 'while we're together and after we part!'"

"Somebody ought to burn that new bridge," said Fran, in a muffled tone; "it's no good making wishes come true."

"Why do you say that? Aren't we the best of friends?"

Fran collected herself, and spoke with cool distinctness: "I have a pretty hard battle to fight, Mr. Ashton, and it's necessary to know who's on my side, and who isn't. I may not come out ahead; but I'm not going to lose out from taking a foe for a friend."

"Which you will kindly explain?"

"You are Grace Noir's friend—that explains it."

"I am your friend, too, Fran."

"My friend, *too!*" she echoed bitterly. "Oh, thanks—*also!*"

Abbott came through the gate, and tried to read her face. "Does the fact that I am her friend condemn me?"

"No—just classifies you. You couldn't be her friend if you were not a mirror in which she sees herself; her conscience is so sure, that she hasn't use for anything but a faithful reflector of her opinions. She empties her friends of all personality, and leaves them filled with their imagination of her character."

"Her friends are mere puppets, it appears," Abbott said, smiling. "But that's rather to her credit, isn't it? Would you mind to explain *your* imagination of her character?"

His jesting tone made her impatient. "I don't think her character has ever had a chance to develop; she's too fixed on thinking herself what she isn't. Her opinion of what she ought to be is so sure, that she has never discovered what she really is. And you can't possibly hold a secret from her, if you're her friend; she takes it from you as one snatches a toy from a little child."

Abbott was still amused. "Has she emptied me of all she wants?"

"Yes. You have given her strong weapons against me, and you may be sure she'll use them to her advantage."

"Fran, step back into the light—let me see your face; are you in earnest? Your eyes are smoldering—Oh, Fran, those eyes! What weapons have I given her?"

Fran set her back against the fence, and looked at him darkly. Now and then some one passed, with a curious look, and constrained greeting— for in Littleburg every one was known. "The secret of my age, and the secret of my past."

"I told her neither."

"As soon as you and Mrs. Gregory wheeled away Mrs. Jefferson," said Fran, "I went right down from the choir loft, and straight over to her. I looked her in the eye, and I asked what you had been telling about me. Why, you told her everything, even that I was trying to find out whether you and I would ever—would ever get married! I might aswell say it, it came pat enough from her—_and you told! _Nobody else knew. And you dropped your King of Hearts over the fence—you told her that! And when we were standing there at the gate, you even tried—but no, I'll leave you and Miss Grace to discuss such subjects. Here we are at the same gate, but I guess there's not much danger, now!"

"Fran!" cried Abbott, with burning cheeks, "I didn't tell her, upon my honor I didn't. I *had* to admit dropping the card, to keep her from thinking you out here at midnight with a stranger. She saw us in the shadow, and guessed—that other. I didn't tell her anything about your age. I didn't mention the carnival company."

Fran's concentrated tones grew milder: "But Mrs. Gregory has known about the show all this time. She would die before *she'd* tell on me."

"I never told, Fran. I'm not going to say that again; but you shall believe me."

"Of course, Abbott. But it just proves what I said, about her emptying her friends, about taking their secrets from them even without their knowing she's doing it. I said to her, sharp and quick, 'What have you been saying about me, Miss Noir?' She said—'I understand from Professor Ashton that you are not a young girl at all, but a masquerader of at least eighteen years.' I answered—'Being a masquerader of at least thirty-five, you should have found that out, yourself.' I hardly think she's thirty-five; it wasn't a fair blow, but you have to fight Indians in the brush. Then your friend said, 'Professor Ashton informs me that you are a circus-girl. Don't you think you've strayed too far from the tent?' she asked. I said—'Oh, I brought the show with me; Professor Ashton is my advance advertising agent.' Then she said that if I'd leave, Mr. Gregory need never know that I'm an impostor. But I told her no tickets are going to be returned. I said—'This show absolutely takes place, rain or shine.'"

"Fran," said Abbott in distress, "I want to talk this over—come here in the yard where you're not so conspicuous."

"Show-girls ought to be conspicuous. No, sir, I stay right here in the glaring moonlight. It doesn't call for darkness to tell me anything that is on *your* mind, Professor."

"Fran, you can't hold me responsible for what Miss Grace guessed. I tell you, she *guessed* everything. I was trying to defend you— suddenly she saw through it all. I don't know how it was—maybe Mrs. Gregory can explain, as she's a woman. You shall not deem me capable of adding an atom to your difficulties. You shall feel that I'm your friend 'while we're together and after we part.' You must believe me when I tell you that I need your smile." His voice trembled with sudden tenderness. "You must accept what I say as the greatest fact in my life—that I can't be happy, if you are angry with me."

She looked at him searchingly, then her face relaxed to the eve of revolution. "Who have you been trying to get a glimpse of, all the times you parade the street in front of our house?"

Abbott declared, *"You!"* In mute appeal he held out his hand.

"You're a weak brother, but here—" And she slipped her hand into his. "If she'd been in conversation with me, I wouldn't have let her have any presentiments. It takes talent to keep from telling what you know, but genius to keep the other fellow from guessing. What I hate about it is, that the very next time you fall into her hands, you'll be at her mercy. If I told you a scheme I've been devising, she'd take it from you in broad daylight. She can always prove she's right, because she has the verse for it,—and to deny her is to deny Inspiration. And if she had her way,—she thinks I'm a sort of dissipation—there'd be a national prohibition of Fran."

"If there were a national prohibition of Fran, I'd be the first to smuggle you in somehow, little Nonpareil. I do believe that Miss Grace is the most conscientious person I ever knew, except Mr. Gregory. Just the same, I'm your friend. Isn't it something for me to have taken you on trust as I have, from the very beginning?"

His brown eyes were so earnest that Fran stepped into the shadow. "It's more than something, Abbott. Your trust is about all I have. It's just like me to be wanting more than I have. I'm going to confide in you my scheme. Let's talk it over in whispers." They put their heads together. "Tomorrow, Grace Noir is going to the city with Bob Clinton to select music for the choir—he doesn't know any more about music than poor Uncle Tobe Fuller, but you see, he's still alive. It will be the first day she's been off the place since I came. While she's away, I mean to make my grand effort."

"At what, Little Wonder?"

"At driving her away for good. I'm going to offer myself as secretary, and with her out of sight, I'm hoping to win the day."

"But she's been his secretary for five years—is it reasonable he'd give her up? And would it be honorable for you to work against her in that way? Besides, Fran, she is really necessary to Mr. Gregory's great charity enterprises—"

"The more reason for getting rid of her."

"I don't understand how you mean that. I know Mr. Gregory's work would be seriously crippled. And it would be a great blow to Walnut Street church—she's always there."

"Still, you see she can't stay."

"No, I don't see. You and Miss Grace must be reconciled."

"Oh, Abbott, can't you understand, or is it that you just *won't?* It isn't on *my* account that Miss Noir must leave this house. She's going to bring trouble—she's already done it. I've had lots of experience, and when I see people hurrying down hill, I expect to find them at the bottom, not because it's in the people, but because it's in the direction. I don't care how no-account folks are, if they keep doggedly climbing up out of the valley, just give 'em time, and they'll reach the mountain-top. I believe some mighty good-intentioned men are stumbling down hill, carrying their religion right into hell."

"Hush, little friend! You don't understand what religion is."

"If I can't find out from its fruits, I don't want to know."

"Of course. But consider how Miss Grace's labors are blessing the helpless."

"Abbott, unless the fruits of religion are flavored by love, they're no more account than apples taken with bitter-rot—not worth fifty cents a barrel. The trouble with a good deal of the church-fruit to- day is bitter-rot."

Abbott asked slyly, "What about your fruit, out there in the world?"

"Oh," Fran confessed, with a gleam, "we're not in the orchard-business at all, out here."

Abbott laid his hand earnestly upon her arm. "Fran! Come in and help us spray."

"You dear old prosy, preachy professor!" she exclaimed affectionately,
"I have been thinking of it. I've half a mind to try, really. Wouldn't
Grace Noir just die?...O Lord, there she comes, now!"

Fran left the disconsolate young man in wild precipitation, and flew into the house. He wondered if she had been seen standing there, and he realized that, if so, the purest motives could not outweigh appearances. He turned off in another direction, and Gregory and Grace came slowly toward the house, having, without much difficulty, eliminated Simon Jefferson from their company.

In truth, Simon, rather than be improved by their conversation, had dived down a back alley, and found entrance through the side door. When Hamilton Gregory and his secretary came into the reception hall, the old bachelor lay upon a divan thinking of his weak heart—Fran's flight from the choir loft had reminded him of it—and Mrs. Jefferson was fanning him, as if he were never to be a grown man. Mrs. Gregory sat near the group, silently embroidering in white silk. Fran had hastily thrown herself upon the stairway, and, with half-closed eyes, looked as if she had been there a long time.

"Fran," said Mr. Gregory coldly, "you left the choir practice before we were two-thirds done. Of course I could hardly expect you—" he looked at his wife—"to stay, although your presence would certainly have kept Fran there; and it does look as if we should be willing to resort to any expedient to keep her there!"

"How would a lock and chain do?" Fran inquired meekly.

"I don't think she came straight home, either," remarked Grace Noir significantly. "Did you, Fran?"

"Miss Noir," said Fran, smiling at her through the banister-slats, "you are so satisfactory; you always say just about what I expect. Yes, I came straight home. I'm glad it's your business, so you could ask."

Hamilton Gregory turned to his wife again, with restraint more marked. "Next Sunday is roll-call day, Mrs. Gregory. The board has decided to revise the lists. We've been carrying so many names that it's a burden to the church. The world reproaches us, saying, 'Isn't So-and-so a member? He never attends, does he?' I do hope you will go next Sunday!" Mrs. Gregory looked down at her work thoughtfully, then said, "Mother would be left—"

"It's just this way," her husband interposed abruptly: "If no excuses, such as sickness, are sent, and if the people haven't been coming for months, and *don't* intend coming, we are simply determined to drop the names—strike 'em out. *We* believe church members should show where they stand. And—and if you —"

Mrs. Gregory looked up quietly. Her voice seemed woven of the silk threads she was stitching in the white pattern. "If I am not a member of the church, sitting an hour in the building couldn't make me one."

Simon Jefferson cried out, "Is that my sister Lucy? Blessed if I thought she had so much spirit!"

"Do you call *that* spirit?" returned Gregory, with displeasure.

"Well!" snorted Simon, "what do *you* call it, then?"

"Perhaps," responded Gregory, with marked disapprobation, "perhaps it *was* spirit."

Grace, still attired for the street, looked down upon Mrs. Gregory as if turned to stone. Her beautiful face expressed something like horror at the other's irreverence.

Fran shook back her hair, and watched with gleaming eyes from behind the slats, not unlike a small wild creature peering from its cage.

"Oh," cried Fran, "Miss Noir feels *so* bad!"

Grace swept from the hall, her rounded figure instinct with the sufferings of a martyr.

Fran murmured, "That killed her!"

"And *you!*" cried Gregory, turning suddenly in blind anger upon the other—"you don't care whose heart you break."

"*I* haven't any power over hearts," retorted Fran, gripping her fingers till her hands were little white balls. "Oh, if I only had! I'd get at 'em, if I could—like this…"

She leaped to her feet.

"Am I always to be defied by you?" he exclaimed; "is there to be *no* end to it? But suppose I put an end to it, myself—tell you that this is no place for you—"

"You shall never say that!" Mrs. Gregory spoke up, distinctly, but not in his loud tones. She dropped her work in some agitation, and drew Fran to her heart. "I have a friend here, Hamilton—*one friend*—and she must stay."

"Don't you be uneasy, dear one," Fran looked up lovingly into the frightened face. "He won't tell me to go. He won't put an end to it. He won't tell me *anything!*"

"Listen to me, Lucy," said Gregory, his tone altering, "yes, she must stay—that's settled—she must stay. Of course. But you—why will you refuse what I ask, when for years you were one of the most faithful attendants at the Walnut Street church? I am asking you to go next Sunday because—well, you know how people judge by appearances. I'm not asking it for my sake—of course *I* know your real character—but go for Miss Grace's sake—go to show *her* where you stand. Lucy, I told her on the way from choir practice—I promised her that you should be there."

"How is it about church attendance, anyway?" asked Fran, with the air of one who seeks after knowledge. "I thought you went to church for the Lord's sake, and not for Miss Noir's."

"I have given you my answer, Mr. Gregory," said his wife faintly, "but
I am sorry that it should make me seem obstinate—"

He uttered a groan, and left the hall in despair. His gesture said that he must give it up.

Mrs. Gregory folded her work, her face pale and drawn, her lips tremulous. She looked at Fran, and tried to smile. "We must go to rest, now," she said—"if we can."

CHAPTER XIV

FIGHTING FOR HER LIFE

The next day found Fran the bluest of the blue. No laughing now, as she sat alone, half-way up the ladder leading to Gregory's barn-loft. She meant to be just as miserable as she pleased, since there was no observer to be deceived by sowing cheat-seed of merriment.

"The battle's on now, to a finish," muttered Fran despondently, "yet here I sit, and here I scrooch." With her skirts gathered up in a listless arm till they were unbecomingly abridged, with every muscle and fiber seeming to sag like an ill-supported fence, Fran's thoughts were at the abysmal stage of discouragement. For a time, there seemed in her heart not the tiniest taper alight, and in this blackness, both hope and failure were alike indistinguishable.

"But we'll see," she cried, at last coming down the ladder, "we'll see!" and she clenched her fists, flung open the barn-door and marched upon the house with battle in her eyes. Girding up her loins—that is, smoothing her hair—and sharpening her weapons for instant use, she opened the library door.

She knew Grace Noir had gone to the city with Robert Clinton, and yet her feeling on seeing Hamilton Gregory alone, was akin to surprise. How queerly lonesome he looked, without his secretary! There was something ghostly about Grace Noir's typewriter—it seemed to have fallen into Fran's power like an enemy's trophy too easily captured. The pens and pencils were at her mercy, so readily surrendered that they suggested treachery. Did an ambuscade await her? But impossible— no train returned from the city until nine in the evening, and it was now only three in the afternoon—six hours of clear field.

She found the philanthropist immersed in day-dreams. So deep was he below the surface of every-day thoughts, that he might be likened to a man walking on the floor of the sea. The thought of the good his money and influence were accomplishing thrilled his soul, while through the refined ether of this pious joy appeared the loveliness of Grace Noir, lending something like spiritual sensuousness to his vision of duty.

He did not want the applause of the general public any more than he wanted his past unearthed. It was enough if his philanthropy was known to God and Grace Noir. She stood, to his mind, as a symbol of religion—there can be no harm in reverencing symbols.

Fran's eyes drew him abruptly from the bottom of the sea. He emerged, chilled and trembling. "Fran," he said, as if she had appeared in answer to a summons, "I am unhappy about you. Your determination to have nothing to do with the church not only distresses but embarrasses me. You have insisted on coming into my life. Then why do you disgrace it? You pretend that you want to be liked by us, yet you play cards with strangers at night—it's outrageous. You even threw a card in my yard where a card was never seen before."

"Do you think cards so very wicked?" asked Fran, looking at him curiously.

"You know what I think. I look on gambling as immoral. But it ought to be enough for me simply to forbid it. Cards, and dancing, and the theater—these things are what destroy the influence of the church."

"And not going to the meeting-house," remarked Fran, with quiet irony,—"that's perfectly dreadful."

She closed the door, and placed her back against it. A shake of her head seemed to throw aside what they had been saying as of no more importance than the waving tresses of black hair. She looked him in the eyes, and said abruptly—

"I want to be your secretary."

Hamilton gripped his chair. He found the air hard to breathe after his submarine inaction—doubtless he had stayed under too long. "I *have* a secretary," he retorted, looking at her resentfully. He checked words he would have liked to utter, on reflecting that his secret was in Fran's keeping. She need but declare it, and his picture would blossom forth in all the papers of the big cities. How Grace would shrink from him, if she knew the truth—how that magnificent figure would turn its back upon him—and those scornful, imperious, never- faltering eyes...

Fran drew nearer. She seated herself upon the arm of a chair, one foot on the floor, and spoke with restrained intensity: "I'm well enough educated. I can take dictation and make good copy."

He allowed his tone to sound defiance—"I already have a secretary."

Fran continued with an effort, "Mother didn't like studying, very well, but she was determined to get me out of the condition I was born in; she taught me all she knew. When I caught up, she'd go digging ahead on her own account to pull me a little higher. Wasn't she splendid! So patient—" Fran paused, and stared straight before her, straight into the memory of her mother's eyes.

Gregory reflected—"If this child had not come, had not intruded herself upon my life! Haven't I suffered enough for my follies?"

"When mother died," Fran resumed, "she thought maybe Uncle Ephraim had mellowed, so I went to him, because I thought I couldn't get along without love." She shook her head, with a pathetic little smile. "But I could! Uncle Ephraim didn't mellow, he dried up. He blamed me for being born—I think, myself, it was a mistake. He turned me out, but I was so tough I just couldn't be winter-killed. After that I went back to the show and stocked up in experience. I mention it to point out that a mild little job like being your private secretary wouldn't strain a muscle. I expect I could even be a foreign secretary. It's as easy to walk a rope that's rigged high, as one near the ground. All the trouble is in the imagination."

Gregory's voice cut across hers, showing no comprehension of her last words: "My secretary must be in sympathy with my work. To exercise such talents as I have, is my religion, and I need a helper whose eyes are fixed upon the higher life. This is final, and the subject must never be reopened. I find it very painful."

Fran's discovery that he had not heard her plea, crimsoned her face. She jumped from the armchair, breathing rapidly. "Then," she cried, "if you won't have me, get another. The one you have must go."

"She shall do nothing of the sort," he coldly responded.

"Yes," Fran retorted violently, "I tell you she must go!" He struck the table with his palm. "Never!"

"Shall I use my last resource?" Fran's eyes gleamed ominously.

The hand upon the table became a fist. That was his only reply.

"I would entreat you," said Fran, faltering, "and with tears—but what good would it do? None. There's no use for one woman to weep if another woman is smiling. Dismiss your secretary."

He leaned toward her from over the table, and spoke in a low level tone: "I am going to appeal to your better nature. Think of the girls of the street who need rescue, and the women of the cities who are dying from neglect and vice. If you hinder my work, let the souls of these outcasts be upon your soul! You can ruin me, but not without ruining my good works. I don't ask you to keep silent on my account— what am I but an instrument in the hands of Providence?—but for the sake of the homeless thousands. I have atoned for my past, but the world, always ready to crucify the divine, would rejoice to point the finger of scorn at me, as if I were still the fool of twenty years ago."

"But your secretary—"

"She is a vital factor in my work. Remove her, and the work ceases."

"How important!" cried Fran, throwing back her head. "What will God dowhen she dies?"

"Perhaps I have gone too far. Still, it would be impossible to replace her."

Fran made a step toward him—"My mother was replaced."

He started up. "You shall not speak of that. She lived her life, and I demand the right to live mine. I tell you, the past is ended."

"But I am here," returned Fran. "I have not ended. Can't you look into my face and see my mother living? She paid for her secret marriage, wandering over the face of the earth with her baby, trying to find you. I don't deny that you've paid for all—yes, even for your desertion and your living a hidden life in this town. Maybe you've suffered enough. But that isn't the question. Look at me. I am here. I have come as truly out of your past as out of the past of my darling, uncomplaining—what did you call her? —'*friend*'. And being here, I ask, 'What will you do with me?' All I want is—just a little love."

The long loneliness of her life found expression in the eager voice, in the yearning eyes. As he stared at her, half-stupefied, he imagined she was holding out her arms to him in pleading. But it was not this erect form, slight and tense, that reached forth as if to clasp him to her heart; it was a memory of his youth, a memory that in some oddmanner blurred his perception of the living presence. From the fragile body of Fran, something leaped toward him, enveloping, overpowering.

It was partly Fran, and partly somebody else—how well he knew that other somebody, that dead woman who had found reincarnation in the soul of this wanderer.

She thought his covered face a token of weakening. "You must have loved my mother once. Is it all so dead and forgotten that there is none left for your child?"

But she was seeking to play upon strings that had long since ceased to vibrate. He could not bring back, even in retrospect, the emotions inspired by Josephine Derry. Those strings had been tuned to other love-harmonies. To remember Fran's mother was to bring back not the rapture of a first passion, but the garrish days of disillusionment. He even felt something like resentment because she had remained faithful—her search and unending love for him made so much more of his desertion than ever he had made.

He could not tell Fran that he had never loved her mother. The dead must not be reproached; the living could not be denied—so he was silent.

His silence inspired Fran with hope. "I am so lonely, so lonely!" she murmured plaintively, "so very lonely! There seems a reason for everybody but me—I can't be explained. That's why I am disliked. If there could be one heart for me to claim—whose heart should it be? Does no sort of feeling tell you whose heart it should be?"

"Of course you are lonely, child, but that is your fault. You are in this house on a footing of equality, and all seem to like you, except Miss Grace—and I must say, her disapproval disturbs you very little. But you won't adopt our ways. You get yourself virtually expelled from school—do you blame me for that? You won't go to church—can you expect church people to like you? You make everybody talk by your indiscreet behavior—then wonder that the town shuns your society, and complain because you feel lonesome!"

Fran's eyes filled with tears. "If you believe in me—if you try to like me—that's all I ask. The whole town can talk, if I have you. I don't care for the world and its street corners—there are no street corners in my world."

"But, child—"

"You never call me Fran if you can help it," she interposed passionately." Even the dogs have names. Call me by mine; it's Fran. Say it, say it. Call me—oh, father, *father*. I want your love."

"Hush!" he gasped, ashen pale. "You will be overheard."

She extended her arms wildly: "What do you know about God, except that He's *Father*. That's all—Father—and you worship Him as His son. Yet you want me to care for your religion. Then why don't you show me the way to God? Can you love Him and deny your own child? Am I to pray to Him as my Father in Heaven, but not dare acknowledge my father on earth? No! I don't know how others feel, but I'll have to reach heavenly things through human things. And I tell you that you are standing between me and God, just as the lives of so many Christians hide God from the world."

"Hush, hush!" cried Gregory. "Child! this is sacrilege!"

"No, it is not. I tell you, I can't see God, because you're in the way. You pray 'Our Father who art in Heaven…give us this day our daily bread.' And I pray to you, and I say, My father here on earth, give me—give me—your love. That's what I want—nothing else—I want it so bad…I'm dying for it, father, can't you understand? Look—I'm praying for it—" She threw herself wildly at his feet.

Deeply moved, he tried to lift her from the ground.

"No," cried Fran, scarcely knowing what she said, "I will not get up till you grant my prayer. I'm not

asking for the full rich love a child has the right to expect—but give me a crust, to keep me alive—father, give me my daily bread. You needn't think God is going to answer your prayers, if you refuse mine."

Hamilton Gregory took her in his arms and held her to his breast. "Fran," he said brokenly, "my unfortunate child…my daughter—oh, why were you born?"

"Yes," sobbed Fran, resting her head upon his bosom, "yes, why was I born?"

"You break my heart," he sobbed with her.

"Fran, say the word, and I will tell everything; I will acknowledge you as my daughter, and if my wife —"

Fran shook her head. "You owe no more to my mother than to her," she said, catching her breath. "No, the secret must be kept—always. Nothing belongs to us but the future, since even the present belongs to the past. Father—I must never call you that except when we are alone—I must always whisper it, like a prayer—father, let me be your secretary."

It was strange that this request should surround Fran with the chill atmosphere of a tomb. His embrace relaxed insensibly. His moment of self-abnegation had passed, and life appeared suddenly at the level. He looked at his daughter in frightened bewilderment, as if afraid she had drawn him too far from his security for further hiding. During the silence, she awaited his decision.

It was because of her tumultuous emotions that she failed to hear advancing footsteps.

"Some one is coming," he exclaimed, with ill-concealed relief. "We mustn't be seen thus—we would be misunderstood." He strode to the window, and pretended to look out. His face cleared momentarily.

The door opened, and Grace Noir started in, then paused significantly.
"Am I interrupting?" she asked, in quietest accent.

"Certainly not," Gregory breathed freedom. His surprise was so joyful that he was carried beyond himself. "Grace! It's Grace! Then you didn't go to the city with Bob. There wasn't any train—"

"I am here—" began Grace easily—

"Yes, of course, that's the main thing," his delight could not be held in check. "You are here, indeed! And you are looking—I mean you look well—I mean you are not ill—your return is so unexpected."

"I am here," she steadily persisted, "because I learned something that affects my interests. I went part of the way with Mr. Clinton, but after thinking over what had been told me, I decided to leave the train at the next station. I have been driven back in a carriage. I may as well tell you, Mr. Gregory, that I am urged to accept a responsible position in Chicago."

He understood that she referred to marriage with Robert Clinton.
"But—" he began, very pale.

She repeated, "A responsible position in Chicago. And I was told, this morning, that while I was away, Fran meant to apply for the secretaryship, thus taking advantage of my absence."

Fran's face looked oddly white and old, in its oval of black hair. "Who told you this truth?" she demanded, with a menacing gleam of teeth.

"Who knew of your intentions?" the other gracefully said. "But that is no matter. The point is that I have this Chicago opportunity. So if Mr. Gregory wants to employ you, I must know it at once, to make my arrangements accordingly."

"Can you imagine," Hamilton cried reproachfully, "that without any warning, I would make a change? Certainly not. I have no intention of employing Fran. The idea is impossible. More than that, it is—er—it is absolutely preposterous. Would I calmly tear down what you and I have been building up so carefully?"

"Then you had already refused Fran before I came?"

"I had—hadn't I, Fran?"

Fran gave her father a look such as had never before come into her dark eyes—a look of reproach, a look that said, "I can not fight back because of the agony in my heart." She went away silent and with downcast head.

CHAPTER XV

IN SURE-ENOUGH COUNTRY

One morning, more than a month after the closing days of school, Abbott Ashton chanced to look from his bedroom window as Hamilton Gregory's buggy, with Fran in it, passed.

There were no more examination-papers for Abbott to struggle with; but, like bees who spend the pleasantest weather in hardest work, he was laying up mathematical sweetness and psychological succulence against the day when he might become a professor at Yale or Harvard.

Unthrifty Fran, on the contrary, was bent upon no mission of self- improvement. Long fishing-poles projecting from the back of the buggy, protested against the commercialism of the age; their yellow hue streaked the somber background of a money-getting world, while the very joints of the poles mocked at continuity of purpose.

By Fran's side, Abbott discovered a man. True, it was "only" Simon Jefferson; still, for all his fifty years and his weak heart, it was not as if it were some pleasant respectable woman—say Simon's mother. However, old ladies do not sit upon creek-banks.

The thought of sitting upon the bank of a stream suggested to Abbott that it would be agreeable to pursue his studies in the open air. The June morning had not yet had its dewy sweetness burned away by a droughty old sun. Abbott snatched up some books and went below. In almost every front yard there were roses. Up and down the street, they bloomed in all colors, with delicate, penetrating, intoxicating fragrance. They were not hidden away in miserly back-gardens, these roses; they smiled for the meanest beggar, for the most self- sufficient tramp, for the knowledge-burdened scholar, for the whistling driver of the grocer's wagon. They had often smiled in vain for Abbott Ashton, but that was before he had made the bewildering discovery that they were like Fran.

On the green veranda he paused to inhale their fragrance.

"I'm glad you've left your room," said Miss Sapphira, all innocence, all kindness. "You'll study yourself to death. It won't make any more of life to take it hard—there's just so much for every man."

Abbott smiled abstractedly. He heard nothing but the voices of the roses.

Huge and serious, Miss Sapphira sat in the shadow of the bay-window. Against the wall were arranged sturdy round-backed wooden chairs, each of which could have received the landlady's person without a quiver of a spindle. Everything about Abbott seemed too carefully ordered—he pined for the woods—some mossy bank sloping to a purling stream.

Suddenly Miss Sapphira grew ponderously significant. Her massive head trembled from a weight of meaning not to be lifted lightly in mere words, her double chins consolidated, and her mouth became as the granite door of a cave sealed against the too-curious.

Abbott paused uneasily before his meditated flight—"Have you heard any news?"

She answered almost tragically, "Board meeting, to-night."

Ordinarily, teachers for the next year were selected before the close of the spring term; only those "on the inside" knew that the fateful board meeting had been delayed week after week because of disagreement over the superintendency. There was so much dissatisfaction over Abbott Ashton—because of "so much talk"—that even Robert Clinton had thought it best to wait, that the young man might virtually be put upon good behavior.

"To-night," the young man repeated with a thrill. He realized how important this meeting would prove in shaping his future. Miss Sapphira was too appallingly significant to mean otherwise. If anybody was on the "inside" it was the chairman's sister.

"Yes," she said warningly. "And Bob is determined to do his duty. He never went very far in his own education because he didn't expect to be a school-teacher—but ever since he's been chairman of the school- board, he's aimed to have the best teachers, so the children can be taught right; most of 'em are poor and may want to teach, too, when they're grown. I think all the board'll be for you to-night, Abbott, and I've been glad to notice that for the last month, there's been less talk. And by the way," she added,

"that Fran-girl went by with Simon Jefferson just now, the two of them in Brother Gregory's buggy. They're going to Blubb's Riffle—he with his weak heart, and her with that sly smile of hers, and it's a full three mile!"

Abbott did not volunteer that he had seen them pass, but his face showed the ostensible integrity of a jam-thief, who for once finds himself innocent when missing jam is mentioned.

She was not convinced by his look of guilelessness. "You seem to be carrying away your books."

"I want to breathe in this June morning without taking it strained through window-screens," he explained.

Miss Sapphira gave something like a choked cough, and compressed her lips. "Abbott," she said, looking at him sidewise, "please step to the telephone, and call up Bob—he's at the store. Tell him to leave the clerk in charge and hitch up and take me for a little drive. I want some of this June morning myself."

Abbott obeyed with alacrity. On his return, Miss Sapphira said, "Bob's going to fight for you at the board meeting, Abbott. We'll do what we can, and I hope you'll help yourself. I don't wish any harm to that Fran-girl. Bob says I'm always expecting the worst of people and I guess I am; but I must say I don't expect half as bad as they turn out."

As Abbott went down the fragrant street with its cool hose-refreshed pavements, its languorous shadows athwart rose-bush and picket fence, its hopeful weeds already peering through crevices where plank sidewalks maintained their worm-eaten right of way, he was in no dewy- morning mood. He understood what those wise nods had meant, and he was in no frame of mind for such wisdom. He meant to go far, far away from the boarding-house, from the environment of schools and school-boards, from Littleburg with its atmosphere of ridiculous gossip.

Of course he could have gone just as far, if he had not chosen the direction of Blubb's Riffle—but he had to take some direction. He halted before he came in sight of the stream; if Fran had a mind to fish with Simon Jefferson, he would not spoil her sport.

He found a comfortable log where he might study under the gracious sky. Across the road, a bill-board flaunted a many-colored advertisement, but it did not distract his attention—it had lost its novelty from over-production. There was to be a Street Carnival beginning July first. There would be a Fortune Teller, a Lion Show, a Snake Den, etc. The Fourth of July would be the Big Day; a Day of Confetti, of Fireworks, of Riotous Mirth and patriotism—the last word was the only one on the bill not capitalized.

Abbott studied hard. He did not learn much—there seemed a bird in every line.

When he closed his books, scarcely knowing why, and decided to ramble, it was with no intention of seeking Fran. Miss Sapphira might have guessed what would happen, but in perfect innocence, the young man strolled, seeking a grassy by-road, seldom used, redolent of bush, tree, vine, dust-laden weed. It was a road where the sun seemed almost a stranger; a road gone to sleep and dreaming of the feet of stealthy Indians, of noisy settlers, and skilful trappers. All such fretful bits of life had the old road drained into oblivion, and now it seemed to call on Abbott to share their fate, the fate of the forgotten.

But the road lost its mystic meaning when Abbott discovered Fran. Suddenly it became only a road—nay, it became nothing. It seemed that the sight of Fran always made wreckage of the world about her.

She was sitting in the Gregory buggy, but, most surprising of all, there was no horse between the shafts—no horse was to be seen, anywhere. Best of all, no Simon Jefferson was visible. Fran in the buggy—that was all. Slow traveling, indeed, even for this sleepy old road!

"Not in a hurry, are you?"

"I've arrived," Fran said, in unfriendly tone.

Smaller than ever, she appeared, shrinking back in a corner of the seat, as if the vital qualities of her being were compressed to bring all within the scope of one eyeflash. Abbott loved the laced shadows of the trees upon the bared head, he adored the green lap-robe protecting her feet. The buggy-top was down and the trees from either side strove each to be first, to darken Fran's black hair with shadow upon shade.

"Are you tired of fishing, Fran?"

"Yes, and of being fished."

She had closed the door in his face, but he said—as through the keyhole—"Does that mean for me to go away?"

"You are a pretty good friend, Mr. Ashton," she said with a curl of her lip, "I mean—when we are alone."

"'While we're together, and after we part'," he quoted. "Fran, surely you don't feel toward me the way you are looking."

"Exactly as I'm looking at you, that's the way I feel. Stand there as long as you please—"

"I don't want to stand a moment longer. I want to sit with you in the buggy. Please don't be so—so old!"

Fran laughed out musically, but immediately declared: "I laughed because you are unexpected; it doesn't mean I like you any better. I hate friendship that shows itself only in private. Mr. Chameleon, I like people to show their true colors."

"I am not Mr. Chameleon, and I want to sit in your buggy."

"Well, then get in the very farthest corner. Now look me in the eyes."

"And oh, Fran, you have such eyes! They are so marvelously—er— unfriendly."

"I'm glad you ended up that way. Now look me in the eyes. Suppose you should see the school-board sailing down the road, Miss Sapphira thrown in. What would you do?"

"What should I do?"

"Hide, I suppose," said Fran, suddenly rippling.

"Then you look me in the eyes and listen to *me,"* he said impressively. "Weigh my words—have you scales strong enough?"

"Put 'em on slow and careful."

"I am *not* Mr. Chameleon for I show my true color. And I *am* a real friend, no matter what kind of tree I am—" He paused, groping for a word.

"Up?" she suggested, with a sudden chuckle. "All right—let the school-board come. But you don't seem surprised to see me here in the buggy without Mr. Simon."

"When Mr. Simon comes, he'll find me right here," Abbott declared. "Fran, please don't be always showing your worst side to the town; when you laugh at people's standards, they think you queer—and you can't imagine just how much you are to me."

"Huh!" Fran sniffed. "I'd hate to be anybody's friend and have my friendship as little use as yours has been to me."

He was deeply wounded. "I've tried to give good advice—"

"I don't need advice, I want help in carrying out what I already know." Her voice vibrated. "You're afraid of losing your position if you have anything to do with me. Of course I'm queer. Can I help it, when I have no real home, and nobody cares whether I go or stay?"

"You know I care, Fran."

Fran caught her lip between her teeth as if to hold herself steady. "Oh, let's drive," she said recklessly, striking at the dashboard with the whip, and shaking her hair about her face till she looked the elfish child he had first known.

"Fran, you know I care—you know it."

"We'll drive into Sure-Enough Country," she said with a half-smile showing on the side of her face next him. "Whoa! Here we are. All who live in Sure-Enough Country are sure-enough people—whatever they say is true. Goodness!" She opened her eyes very wide—"It's awful dangerous to talk in Sure-Enough Country." She put up the whip, and folded her hands.

"I'm glad we're here, Fran, for you have your friendly look."

"That's because I really do like you. Let's talk about yourself—how you expect to be what you'll be—you're nothing yet, you know, Abbott; but how did you come to determine to be something?"

Into Abbott's smile stole something tender and sacred. "It was all my mother," he explained simply. "She died before I received my state certificate, but she thought I'd be a great man—so I am trying for it."

"And she'll never know," Fran lamented.

She slipped her hand into his. "Didn't *I* have a mother? Oh, these mothers! And who can make mother-wishes come true? Well! And you just studied with all your might; and you'll keep on and on, till you're... out of my reach, of course. Which would have suited your mother, too." She withdrew her hand.

"My mother would have loved you," he declared, for he did not understand, so well as Fran, about mothers' liking for strange young ladies who train lions.

"Mine would you," Fran asserted, with more reason.

Abbott, conscious of a dreadful emptiness, took Fran's hand again.
"I'll never be out of your reach, Fran."

She did not seek to draw away, but said, with dark meaning, "Remember the bridge at midnight."

"I remember how you looked, with the moonlight silvering your face— you were just beautiful that night, little Nonpareil!"

"But not quite so in daylight," murmured Fran wickedly, "as this morning?"

"Anyway," he answered desperately, "you look as I'd have you look—can you ask more than that, since I can't?"

"My chin is so sharp," she murmured.

"Yes," he said, softly feeling the warm little fingers, one by one, as if to make sure all were there. "That's the way I like it—sharp."

"And I'm so ridiculously thin—"

"You're nothing like so thin as when you first came to Littleburg," he declared. "I've noticed how you are—have been—I mean..."

"Filling out?" cried Fran gleefully. "Oh, yes, and I'm so glad you know, because since I've been wearing long dresses, I've been afraid you'd never find it out, and would always be thinking of me as you saw me at the beginning. But I am—yes—filling out."

"And your little feet, Fran—"

"Yes, I always had a small foot. But let's get off of this subject."

"Not until I say something about your smile—oh, Fran, that smile!"

"The subject, now," remarked Fran, "naturally returns to Grace Noir."

"Please, Fran!"

"Yes—and I am going to say something to offend you; but honestly, Abbott, it's for your good. If you'll keep holding my hand, I'll know you can stand unpleasant truths. When you hold my hand, it seems to make everything so—so close."

"Everything is!" Abbott declared.

"I'll tell you why you hurt my feelings, Abbott. You've disappointed me twice. Oh, if I were a man, I'd show any meek-faced little hypocrite if she could prize secrets out of me. Just because it wears dresses and long hair, you think it an angel."

"Meaning Miss Grace, I presume?" remarked Abbott dryly. "But what is the secret, this time?"

"Didn't I trust you with the secret that I meant to apply for the position of secretary as soon as Grace Noir was out of the way? And I was just about to win the fight when here she came—hadn't been to the city at all, because you told her what I meant to do—handed her the secret, like a child giving up

something it doesn't want."

"You are very unjust. I did not tell her your plan. I don't know how she found it out."

"From you; nobody else knew it."

"She did not learn it from me."

"—And that's what gets me!—you tell her everything, and don't even know that you tell. Just hypnotized! Answer my questions: the morning after I told you what I meant to do—standing there at the fence by the gate—confiding in you, telling you everything—I say, the next morning, didn't you tell Grace Noir all about it?"

"Certainly not."

"You had a conversation with her, didn't you?"

Abbott tried to remember, then said casually, "I believe we did meet on the street that morning."

"Yes," said Fran ironically, "I believe you did meet *somewhere.* Of course she engaged you in her peculiar style of inquisitorial conversation?"

"We went down the street together."

"Now, prisoner at the bar, relate all that was said while going down the street together."

"Most charming, but unjust judge, not a word that I can remember, so it couldn't have been of any interest. I did tell her that since she— yes, I remember now—since she was to be out of town all day, I would wait until to-morrow to bring her a book she wanted to borrow."

"Oh! And then she wanted to know who told you she would be out of town all day, didn't she?"

Abbott reflected deeply, then said with triumph, "Yes, she did. I remember that, too. She asked me how I knew she was going to the city with Bob Clinton. And I avoided telling her—it was rather neat. I merely said that it was the understanding they were to select the church music. Not another word was said on the subject."

"That was enough. Mighty neat. As soon as she saw you were trying to avoid a direct answer, she knew I'd told you. That gave her a clue to my leaving the choir practice before the rest of them. She guessed something important was up. She might not have guessed all the details, but she didn't dare leave me an open field. Well, Abbott, you are certainly an infant in her hands, but I guess you can't help it."

Self-pride was touched, and he retaliated:

"Fran, I hate to think of your being willing to take her position behind her back."

She crimsoned.

"You'd know how I feel about it," he went on, "if you understood her better. I know her duty drives her to act in opposition to you, and I'm sorry for it. But her religious ideals—"

"Abbott, be honest and answer—is there anything in it—this talk of doing God's will? Can people love God and hate one another? Oh, isn't it all just *words?"* Her eyes burned fiercely. "I wouldn't *have* the love that some folks give God, I'd feel myself insulted! I want something better than He gets. I want a love that holds out. I just hate shams," she went on, becoming more excited. "I don't care what fine names you give them—whether it's marriage, or education, or culture, or religion, if there's no heart in it, it's a sham, and I hate it. I hate a lie. But a thousand times more, do I hate a life that is a lie."

"Fran! You don't know what you are saying."

"Yes I do know what I'm saying. Is religion going to church? That's all I can see in it. I want to believe there's something else, I've honestly searched, for I wanted to be comforted, I tell you, I *need* it. But I can't find any comfort in mortar and stained-windows. If lightning *ever* strikes a church-member between services, is his face toward God? No, people just name something religion,—and then it's wrong to find fault with it. I want something that makes a man true to his wife, and makes a family live together in blessed harmony, something that's good on the streets and in the stores, something that makes people even treat a show-girl well. If there's anything in it, why doesn't a father—"

She snatched away her hand that she might cover her face, for she had burst into passionate

weeping. "Why doesn't a father who's always talking about religion, and singing about it, and praying about it— why doesn't that father draw his daughter to his breast…close, close to his heart—that's the only home she asks for—that's the home she has a right to, yes a right, I don't care how far she's wandered— "

"Fran!" cried Abbott, in great distress. "Don't cry, little one!" He had no intelligent word, but his arm was full of meaning as it slipped about her. "Who has been unkind to you, Nonpareil?" She let her head sink upon his shoulder, as she sobbed without restraint. "What shams have pierced your pure heart? Am I the cause of any of these tears? Am I?"

"Yes," Fran answered, between her sobs, "you're the cause of all my happy tears." She nestled there with a movement of perfect trust; he drew her closer, and stroked her hair tenderly, trusting himself.

Presently she pulled herself to rights, lifted his arm from about her, and rested it on the back of the seat—a friendly compromise. Then she shook back her hair and raised her eyes and a faint smile came into the rosy face. "I'm so funny," she declared. "Sometimes I seem so strange that I need an introduction to myself." She looked into Abbott's eyes fleetingly, and drew in the corners of her mouth. "I guess, after all, there's something in religion!"

Abbott was so warmed by returning sunshine that his eyes shone. "Dear Fran!" he said—it was very hard to keep his arm where she had put it. She tried to look at him steadily, but somehow the light hurt her eyes. She could feel its warmth burning her cheeks.

"Oh, Fran," cried Abbott impulsively, "the bridge in the moonlight was nothing to the way you look now—so beautiful—and so much more than just beautiful…"

"This won't do," Fran exclaimed, hiding her face. "We must get back to Grace Noir immediately."

"Oh, Fran, oh, no, *please!"*

"I won't please. While we're in Sure-Enough Country, I mean to tell you the whole truth about Grace Noir." The name seemed to settle the atmosphere—she could look at him, now.

"I want you to understand that something is going to happen—must happen, just from the nature of things, and the nature of wives and husbands—and the other woman. Oh, you needn't frown at me, I've seen you look that *other* way at me, so I know you, Abbott Ashton."

"Fran! Then you know that I—"

"No, you must listen. You've nothing important to tell *me* that I don't know. I've found out the whole Gregory history from old Mrs. Jefferson, without her knowing that she was telling anything—she's a sort of 'Professor Ashton' in my hands—and I mean to tell you that history. You know that, for about three years, Mrs. Gregory hasn't gone to church—"

"You must admit that it doesn't appear well."

"Admit it? Yes, of course I must. And the world cares for appearances, and not for the truth. That's why it condemns Mrs. Gregory—and me— and that's why I'm afraid the school-board will condemn you: just on account of appearances. For these past three years, the church has meant to Mrs. Gregory a building plus Grace Noir. You'll remember I'm rather mathematical—wasn't that a day, though, when you kept me in! I think it was the first time you learned the color of my eyes, wasn't it?"

"Your eyes," he said, "are the color of friendship." "Abbott, you say the dearest things—but let's get back to our equation. I don't mean that Mrs. Gregory got jealous of Grace Noir—I don't know how to explain—you can't handle cobwebs without marring them." She paused. The gossamer shades of sensibility which she would have defined, threatened to become coarsened by the mere specific gravity of words—such words as have been knocked about the world so long that a sort of material odor clings to them.

"Jealous of—*Miss Grace!"* exclaimed Abbott reprovingly.

"Let's go back, and take a running jump right into the thick of it. When Mr. Gregory came to Littleburg, a complete stranger—and when he married, *she* was a devoted church-member—always went, and took great interest in all his schemes to help folks—folks at a distance, you understand…She just devoured that religious magazine he edits— yes, I'll admit, his religion shows up beautifully in print; the pictures of it are good, too. Old Mrs. Jefferson took pride in beingwheeled to church where she could see her son-in-law leading the music, and where she'd watch every gesture of the minister

and catch the sound of his voice at the high places, where he cried *and,* or *nevertheless.* Sometimes Mrs. Jefferson could get a dozen *ands* and *buts* out of one discourse. Then comes your Grace Noir."

Abbott listened with absorbed attention. It was impossible not to be influenced by the voice that had grown to mean so much to him.

"Grace Noir is a person that's superhumanly good, but she's not happy in her own goodness; it hurts her, all the time, because other folks are not so good as she. You can't live in the house with her without wishing she'd make a mistake to show herself human, but she never does, she's always right. When it's time to go to church, that woman goes, I don't care if there's a blizzard. She's so fixed on being a martyr, that if nobody crosses her, she just makes herself a martyr out of the shortcomings of others."

"As for instance—?"

"As for instance, she suffered martyrdom every time Mrs. Gregory nestled in an arm-chair beside the cozy hearth, when a Ladies' Aid, or a Rally was beating its way through snow-drifts to the Walnut Street church. Mr. Gregory was like everybody else about Grace—he took her at her own value, and that gave the equation: to him, religion meant Walnut Street church plus Grace Noir. For a while, Mrs. Gregory clung to church-going with grim determination, but it wasn't any use. The Sunday-school would have button contests, or the Ladies' Aid would give chicken pie dinners down-town, and Mrs. Gregory would be a red button or a blue button, and she would have her pie; but she was always third—in her home, or at church, she was the third. It was her husband and his secretary that understood the Lord. Somehow she seemed to disturb conditions, merely by being present."

"Fran, you do not realize that your words—they intimate—"

"She disturbed conditions, Abbott. She was like a turned-up light at a seance. A successful manifestation calls for semi-gloom, and when those two were alone, they could get the current. Mr. Gregory was appalled because his wife quit attending church. Grace sympathized in his sorrow. It made him feel toward Grace Noir—but I'm up against a stone wall, Abbott, I haven't the word to describe his feeling, maybe there isn't any. Sad, you know, so sad, but awful sweet—the perfume of locust blossoms, or lilacs in the dew, because Grace has a straight nose and big splendid eyes, and such a form—she's the opposite of me in everything, except that she isn't a man—more's the pity!"

"Fran Nonpareil! Such wisdom terrifies me…such suspicions!" In this moment of hesitancy between conviction and rejection, Abbott felt oddly out of harmony with his little friend. She realized the effect she must necessarily be producing, yet she must continue; she had counted the cost and the danger. If she did not convince him, his thought of her could never be the same.

"Abbott, you may think I am talking from jealousy, and that I tried to get rid of Grace Noir so I could better my condition at her expense. I don't know how to make you see that my story is true. It tells itself. Oughtn't that to prove it? Mrs. Gregory has the dove's nature; she'd let the enemy have the spoils rather than come to blows. She lets him take his choice—here is she, yonder's the secretary. He isn't worthy of her if he chooses Grace—but his hesitation has proved him unworthy, anyhow. He'll never be to Mrs. Gregory what he was—but if she spoke out, there'd be the publicity—the lawyers, the newspapers, the staring in the streets…The old lady—her mother—is a fighter; she'd have driven out the secretary long ago. But Mrs. Gregory's idea seems to be—'If he can want *her,* after I've given him myself, I'll not make a movement to interfere.'"

Abbott played delicately with the mere husk of this astounding revelation: "Have you talked with old Mrs. Jefferson about—about it?"

"She's too proud—wouldn't admit it. But I've slyly hinted…however, it's not the sort of story you could pour through the funnel of an ear-trumpet without getting wheat mixed with chaff. She'd misunderstand—the neighbors would get it first—anyway she wouldn't make a move because her daughter won't. It's you and I, Abbott, against Grace and Mr. Gregory."

He murmured, looking away, "You take me for granted, Fran."

"Yes." Fran's reply was almost a whisper. A sudden terror of what he might think of her, smote her heart. But she repeated bravely, "Yes!"

He turned, and she saw in his eyes a confiding trust that seemed to hedge her soul about. "And you can always take me for granted, Fran; and always is a long time."

"Not too long for you and me," said Fran, looking at him breathlessly.

"I may have felt," he said, "for some time, in a vague way, what you have told me. Of course it is evident that he prefers Miss Noir's society. But I have always thought—or hoped—or wanted to feel, that it was only the common tie of religion—"

"It was not the truth that you clung to, Abbott, but appearances. As for me, let truth kill rather than live as a sham. If Grace Noir stays, the worst is going to happen. She may not know how far she's going. He may not suspect he's doing wrong. People can make anything they want seem right in their own eyes. But I've found out that wickedness isn't stationary, it's got a sort of perpetual motion. If we don't drive Grace away, the crash will come."

"Fran—how you must love Mrs. Gregory!"

"She breaks my heart."

"Dear faithful Fran! What can we do?—I say *We,* Fran, observe."

"Oh, you Abbott Ashton…just what I thought you! No, no, you mustn't interrupt. I'll manage Grace Noir, if you'll manage Bob Clinton."

"Where does Bob Clinton come in?"

"Grace is trying to open a door so he can come in. I mean a secret in Mr. Gregory's past. She suspects that there's a secret in his past, and she intends to send Bob to Springfield where Mr. Gregory left that secret. Bob will bring it to Littleburg. He'll hand it over to Grace, and then she'll have Mr. Gregory in her power—there'll be no getting her hands off him, after that."

"Surely you don't mean that Mr. Gregory did wrong when he was young, and that Miss Noir suspects it?"

"Bob will bring home the secret—and it will kill Mrs. Gregory,
Abbott—and Grace will go off with him—I know how it'll end."

"What is this secret?"

"You are never to know, Abbott."

"Very well—so be it. But I don't believe Mr. Gregory ever did very wrong—he is too good a man."

"Isn't he daily breaking his wife's heart?" retorted Fran with a curl of the lip. "I call that murder."

"But still!—But I can't think he realizes it."

"Then," said Fran satirically, "we'll just call it manslaughter. When I think of his wife's meek patient face—don't you recall that look in her eyes of the wounded deer—and the thousands of times you've seen those two together, at church, on the street, in the library— everywhere…seeing only each other, leaning closer, smiling deeper— as if doing good meant getting close—Oh, Abbott, you know what I mean—don't you, don't you?"

"Yes!" cried Abbott sharply. "Fran, you are right. I have been—all of us have been—clinging to appearances. Yes, I know what you mean."

"You'll keep Bob Clinton from telling that secret, won't you? He's to go to-night, on the long journey—to-night, after the board meeting. It'll take him three or four days. Then he'll come back…"

"But he'll never tell the secret," Abbott declared. His mouth closed as by a spring.

Fran snatched up the whip, and leaned over as if to lash the empty shafts. She had suddenly become the child again. "We must drive out of Sure-Enough Country, now. Time to get back to the Make-Believe World. You know it isn't best to stay long in high altitudes. I've been pretty high—I feel like I've been breathing pretty close to—heaven." She stood up, and the lap-robe fell about her like green waves from which springs a laughing nymph.

Abbott still felt stunned. The crash of an ideal arouses the echo—"Is there no truth in the world?" But yes—Fran was here, Fran the adorable.

"Fran," he pleaded, *"don't* drive out of Sure-Enough Country. Wait long enough for me to tell you what you are to me."

"I know what I am to you," Fran retorted—*"Git ap!"*

"But what am I to you? Don't drive so fast—the trees are racing past like mad. I won't leave Sure-

Enough Country until I've told you all—"

"You shall! No, I'll not let you take this whip—"

"I will take it—let go—Fran! Blessed darling Fran—"

She gripped the whip tightly. He could not loosen her hold, but he could keep her hand in his, which was just as well. Still, a semblance of struggling was called for, and that is why the sound of approaching wheels was drowned in laughter.

"Here we are!" Fran cried wickedly—"Make-Believe World of Every-Day, and some of its inhabitants..."

A surrey had come down the seldom-used road—had Miss Sapphira followed Abbott in order to discover him with Fran? The suspicion was not just, but his conscience seemed to turn color—or was it his face? In fact, Fran and Abbott were both rather red—caused, possibly, by their struggle over the whip.

On the front seat of the surrey were Miss Sapphira and Bob Clinton. On the back seat was Simon Jefferson whose hairy hand gripped a halter fastened to a riderless horse: the very horse which should have been between the shafts of the Gregory buggy.

Miss Sapphira stared at Abbott, speechless. So *this* is what he had meant by wanting the air unstrained by window-screens. Studying, indeed! Abbott, in his turn, stared speechlessly at the led horse.

Bob Clinton drew rein, and grasped his hay-colored mustache, inadequate to the situation. He glanced reproachfully at Abbott; the young fellow must know that his fate was to be decided this very night.

Abbott could not take his fill of the sight of Simon Jefferson whom he had fancied not far away, eyes glued on cork, hands in pockets to escape mosquitoes, sun on back, serenely fishing. He had supposed the horse grazing near by, enjoying semi-freedom with his grass. Now it seemed far otherwise. Miss Sapphira had even had him telephone to Bob to bring her hither. With his own hands he had dug his pitfall.

Fran, suddenly aware of her ridiculous attitude, sat down and began to laugh.

Bob Clinton inquired, "Taking a drive, Abb?"

Miss Sapphira set her heavy foot upon her brother's unseemly jocularity. "Unfortunately," said Miss Sapphira, speaking with cold civility, "Mr. Jefferson had to come clear to town before he could recapture the horse. We were giving him a lift, and had no idea—no *idea* that we should find—should come upon—We are sorry to intrude." Had her life depended on it, Miss Sapphira could not have withheld a final touch—"Possibly you were not looking for Mr. Jefferson to come back *so soon.*"

"Why," answered Abbott, stepping to the ground, "hardly so soon." At any rate, he felt that nothing was to be gained by staying in the buggy. "Is that the horse that belongs to this buggy? Let me hitch it up, Mr. Simon."

"This has been a terrible experience for me," growled Simon. All the same, he let Abbott do the work, but not as if he meant to repay him with gratitude.

"What was the matter with your horse, anyway?" Abbott cheerfully inquired.

Simon looked at him sourly. "Didn't Fran tell you that the horse got scared at her throwing rocks at my cork, and broke from the tree where I'd fastened it, and bolted for town?"

"Mr. Simon," said Fran innocently, "I don't believe the horse was mentioned once, while you were gone."

"It would be interesting to know what was," remarked Robert with humor so dry that apparently it choked him; he fell to coughing huskily.

Miss Sapphira gave him a look while he was struggling in his second paroxysm. It healed him by suggestion.

"Turn," said Miss Sapphira with becoming gravity. Robert, still under the influence of her thought-wave, solemnly drove her from the scene.

When the last buckle was clasped—"I came out here for a quiet peaceable fishing," said Simon.

"I've spent my time hunting horses, and being afraid something might happen to Fran."

"Mr. Ashton took care of me," Fran said reassuringly.

Simon cried explosively, "And who took care of *him?*" He climbed in beside Fran and begrudgingly offered Abbott the imaginary space of a third occupant; but Abbott declared his preference for strolling.

"This has been a hard day for my heart," Simon grumbled, as he snatched up the whip vindictively.

The buggy rolled away.

"Mine, too," Abbott called after them emphatically.

Fran looked back at him, from over the lowered top. He saw her hand go to her bosom, then something fluttered in the air and fell in the grassy road. He darted after it as if it were a clue, showing the way to the princess' castle.

Perhaps it was. He pounced upon it—it was the Queen of Hearts.

CHAPTER XVI

A TAMER OF LIONS

The life of a household progresses, usually by insensible gradations, toward some great event, some climax, for the building of which each day has furnished its grain of sand. To-day, Hamilton Gregory and Grace Noir were in the library, with nothing to indicate the approach of the great moment in their lives. It was Grace's impatience to drive Fran away even before Robert Clinton should bring the secret from Springfield, that precipitated matters.

Grace might have been prompted in part by personal antipathy, but she believed herself acting from a pure sense of duty. Those who absented themselves from the house of worship were goats; those who came were sheep. In vain might you delude yourself that you were a camel, horse, or bird of plumage; to Grace's thinking, there were no such animals in the religious world—her clear eye made nothing of hump, flowing mane, or gaudy feathers; that eye looked dispassionately for the wool upon your back—or the beard under your chin.

"May I speak to you, Mr. Gregory?" She rose from the typewriter, slightly pale from sudden resolution. He noted the pallor, and it seemed to him that in that spiritual face his faith became visible. One hand rested upon the keys of the typewriter as if to show how little she needed substantial support.

Gregory never missed a movement of his secretary, but now he lifted his head ostensibly, to make his observation official.

"It's about Mr. Clinton," said Grace in a low voice, feeling her way to "that Fran".

He laid down his pen with a frown. Suddenly his missions in New York and Chicago became dead weights. Why Grace's "Mr. Clinton" instead of her customary "Brother Clinton"? It seemed to equip the school- director with formidable powers. Gregory hastened to put him where he belonged.

"Oh! Something about Bob?" he asked casually.

Her look was steady, her voice humble: "Yes."

Her humility touched him profoundly. Knowing how unshakable were her resolutions, he made a desperate attempt to divert her mind: "That is settled, Miss Grace, and it's too late now to alter the decision, for the school-board has already voted us a new superintendent—he has been sent his

notification. Abbott Ashton is out of it, and it's all his fault Bob was the only one to stand up for him, but he wasn't strong enough to hold his friend above the wave of popular opinion. Don't ask me to interview Bob for Abbott Ashton."

Grace calmly waited for this futility to pass; then with an air suggesting, "Now, shall we talk sensibly?" she resumed: "I approve the action of the school-board. It did well in dismissing Professor Ashton. May I speak about Mr. Clinton? He urges me to marry him at once."

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed.

"It is not nonsense," Grace calmly responded. "He thinks I could make him a better man. We would work among the very poor in the Chicago settlements; maybe in one of your own missions, I often wonder if I couldn't do more good by personal contact with evil, than I can here, with a person like Fran always clogging my efforts."

He started up. "Grace! *You* go away?—And—and leave me and my work?"

"Let Fran fill my position. You think she's the daughter of your boyhood friend—it would give her position and independence."

"No one can ever fill your place," Gregory exclaimed, with violence. His cheeks burned, lambent flames gleamed in his brown eyes. The effect was startlingly beautiful. At such exalted moments, thinking no evil because ceasing to think, grown all feeling, and it but an infinite longing, the glow of passion refined his face, always delicately sensitive. The vision of Grace, in giving herself to another, like a devouring fire consumed those temporary supports that held him above the shifting sands of his inner nature.

"Grace! But Grace! You wouldn't marry *him!"*

Because she found his beauty appealing to her as never before, her voice was the colder: "Any one's place can be filled."

"You don't *care!"* he cried out desperately.

"For Mr. Clinton? Yes, I admire his persistence in seeking God, and his wish to work for mankind. God comes easier to some than to others, and I believe I could help—"

Gregory, aghast at her measured tone, interrupted: "But I mean that you don't care—don't care for *me."*

"For—" she began abruptly, then added in an odd whisper, "for *you?"*

"Yes, for me…don't care how much I suffer, or whether I suffer at all—I mean my work, if it suffers. If I lose you, Grace—"

"Oh, you will always have Fran."

"Fran!" he ejaculated. "So you don't care, Grace…It seems incredible because I care so much. Grace!" His accent was that of utter despair. "How can I lose you since you are everything? What would be left to live for? Nobody else sympathizes with my aims. Who but you understands? Oh, nobody will ever sympathize—ever care—"

"But, Mr. Gregory!" she began, confused. Her face had grown white.

"Grace!" he caught her hand, expecting it to be snatched away—the hand he had hourly admired at its work; he could feel its warmth, caress its shapeliness—and it did not resist. It trembled. He was afraid to press it at first, lest it be wrenched free; and then, the next moment, he was clasping it convulsively. For the first time in her life, Grace did not meet his eyes.

"Grace!" he panted, not knowing what he was saying, "you care, I see you care for me—don't you?"

"No," she whispered. Her lips were dry, her eyes wide, her bosom heaving. Boundaries hitherto unchangeable, were suddenly submerged. Desperately, as if for her life, she sought to cling to such floating landmarks as Duty, Conscience, Virtue—but they were drifting madly beyond reach.

"But you can't love *him,* can you?" Gregory asked brokenly.

Grace, with closed eyes, shook her head—what harm could there be in that confession? After his voice ceased, she still heard the roaring as of a shell, as if she might be half-drowned in mere sound.

"You won't go away, will you, Grace?" he pleaded, drawing her closer.

She shook her head, lips still parted, eyes still closed.

"Speak to me, Grace. Tell me you will never leave me."

Her lips trembled, then he heard a faint "Never!" Instantly neck and brow were crimsoned; her face, always superb, became enchanting. The dignity of the queen was lost in the woman's greater charm.

"Because you love me!" cried Gregory wildly. "I know you do, now, I know you do!" His arm was about her. "You will never leave me because you love me. Look at me, Grace!"

It seemed that her eyelids were held down by tyrannous thumbs. She tried to lift them, and tried again. Her face was irradiated by the sunrise glow of a master passion. Swiftly he kissed her lips, and as she remained motionless, he kissed her again and again.

Suddenly she exclaimed blindly, "Oh, my God!" Then she threw her arms about him, as he drew her to his bosom.

It was at that moment, as if Fate herself had timed the interruption, that Fran entered.

There was a violent movement of mutual repulsion on the part of Hamilton Gregory and his secretary. Fran stood very still, the sharpness of her profile defined, with the keenness of eyes and a slight grayness about the lips that made her look oddly small and old.

Fran was a dash of water upon raging fire. The effect was not extinguishment, but choking vapors. Bewildered, lost to old self- consciousness, it was necessary for Grace to readjust herself not only to these two, but to herself as well.

Fran turned upon her father, and pointed toward his desk. "Stand there!" she said, scarcely above a whisper.

Gregory burst forth in blind wrath: "How dare you enter the room in this manner? You shall leave this house at once, and for ever....I should have driven you out long ago. Do you hear me? Go!"

Fran's arm was still extended. "Stand there!" she repeated.

Quivering in helpless fury, he stumbled to his desk, and leaned upon it. His face burned; that of Grace Noir was ghastly white.

"Now, *you"* said Fran, her voice vibrating as she faced the secretary, "go to your typewriter!"

Grace did not move.

Fran's eyes resembled cold stones with jagged points as her steady arm pointed: "Go! Stand where I tell you to stand. Oh, I have tamed lions before to-day. You needn't look at me so—I'm not afraid of your teeth."

Grace's fear was not inspired by dread of exposure, but by the realization that she had done what she could not have forgiven in another. But for the supreme moment she might never have realized the real nature of her feeling for her employer. She stood appalled and humiliated, yet her spirit rose in hot revolt because it was Fran who had found her in Gregory's arms. She glared at her defiantly. "Yes," said Fran somberly, "that's my profession, lion-taming. I'm the 'World-Famous Fran Nonpareil'. Go to your typewriter, Grace Noir, I say—Go!"

Grace could not speak without filling every word with concentrated hate: "You wicked little spy, your evil nature won't let you see anything but evil in the fruits of your eavesdropping. You misjudge simply because it would be impossible for you to understand."

"I see by your face that *you* understand—pity you hadn't waked up long ago." Fran looked from one to the other with a dark face. Whether justly or not, they reminded her of two lions in a cage; she stood between, to keep them apart, lest, combining their forces, they spring upon her.

"I understand nothing of what you imagine you know," Grace said stammeringly. "I haven't committed a crime. Stop looking at me as if I had—do you hear?" Her tone was passionate: "I am what I have always been-" Did she say that to reassure herself? "What do you mean, Fran? I command you to put your suspicions in words."

"I have had them roar at me before to-day," cried Fran. "What I mean is that you're to leave the house this day."

"I shall not leave this house, unless Mr. Gregory orders it. It would be admitting that I've done wrong, and I am what I have always been. What you saw…I will say this much, that it shall never happen again. But nothing has happened that you think, little impostor, with your evil mind…I am what I have always been. And I'm going to prove that you are an impostor in a very short time."

Fran turned to Hamilton Gregory. "Tell her to go," she said threateningly. "Tell her she must. Order it. You know what I mean when I say she must go, and she needn't show her claws at me. I don't go into the cage without my whip. Tell her to go."

He turned upon Fran, pushed to utter desperation. "No—*you* shall go!" he said between clenched teeth.

"Yes!" exclaimed Grace. It was a hiss of triumphant hate.

Fran lost control over herself. "Do you think, knowing what I know, that I'll stand quietly by and see you disgrace your wife as you disgraced…Do you think I'll let you have this Grace Noir for your…to be the third—Do you think I've come out of your past life to fold my hands? I tell you plainly that I'll ruin you with that secret before I'll let you have this woman."

Gregory beheld the awful secret quivering upon her lips. The danger drove him mad. *"You devil!"* he shouted, rushing upon her.

Fran stood immovable, her eyes fastened on his. "Don't strike me," she said tensely, "don't strike me, I warn you, unless you kill at the first blow."

[Illustration: "Don't strike me; I warn you."]

He staggered back as if her words possessed physical impact. He shrunk in a heap in the library chair and dropped his head upon his arms. To prevent Grace from learning the truth, he could have done almost anything in that first moment of insane terror; but he could not strike Fran.

In the meantime, Mrs. Gregory had been ascending the stairs. They could hear her now, as she softly moved along the hall. No one in the library wished, at that moment, to confront the wife, and absolute silence reigned in the apartment. They heard her pause, when opposite the door, doubtless to assure herself that the typewriter was at work. If she did not hear the clicking of the keys, she might conclude that Grace was absent, and enter.

Gregory raised his haggard head with an air suggesting meditated flight. Even Grace cowered back instinctively. Swift as a shadow, Fran darted on tiptoe to the typewriter, and began pounding upon it vigorously.

Mrs. Gregory passed on her way, and when she reached the farther end of the hall, an old hymn which she had been humming, broke into audible words. Fran snatched the sheet from the typewriter, and bent her head to listen. The words were soft, full of a thrilling faith, a dauntless courage—

"Still all my song shall be
Nearer my God to Thee,
Nearer—"

A door closed. She was gone. Gregory dropped his head with a groan.

It seemed to Fran that the voice of this wife who was not a wife, lingered in the room. The hymn, no longer audible, had left behind it a fragrance, as sometimes lingers the sweet savor of a prayer, after its "amen" has, as it were, dropped back into the heart whence it issued. Fran instinctively held out both arms toward the direction of the door just closed, as if she could see Mrs. Gregory kneeling behind it.

"Almost," she said, in a solemn undertone, "thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

Had any one but Mrs. Gregory been singing that hymn, had any one but Fran been the one to intrude upon the library scene, Grace must have been overwhelmed. As it was, she stood quite untouched, resolving to stay in order to prove herself, and to show Gregory that they must sacrifice their love for conscience' sake.

Gregory, however, was deeply touched by Fran's yearning arms. He rose and stood before her.

"Fran, child, we promise that what you saw shall never happen again. But you mustn't tell about it. I know you won't tell. I can't send Grace away, because I need her. She will not go because she knows herself to be strong. We are going to hide our souls. And you can't tell what you've seen, on account of

her—" He pointed in the direction of his wife.

Fran knew very well what he meant. If she told the secret, it would disgrace Mrs. Gregory. The revelation might drive Grace away, though Fran did not think so, but certainly whether Grace went, or stayed, it would break the heart of the one she loved best in that home. Gregory was right; Fran could never betray him.

She turned blindly upon Grace: "Then have you no conscience?—you are always talking about one. Does no sense of danger warn you away? Can't you feel any shame?"

Grace did not smile contemptuously. She weighed these words at their real value, and soberly interrogated herself. "No," she declared with deliberation, "I feel no sense of danger because I mean to guard myself after this. And my conscience bids me stay, to show that I have not really done anything —" But she could not deny the feeling of shame, for the burning of her cheeks proved the recollection of hot kisses.

"But suppose I tell what I have seen."

"Well," said Grace, flashing out defiantly, "and suppose you do!"

Gregory muttered, "Who would believe you?"

Fran looked at him. *"Then"* she said, "the coward spoke." She added, "I guess the only way is for you to make her leave. There's nothing in her for me to appeal to."

"I will never tell her to go," he assured her defiantly.

"While, on the contrary," said Grace, "I fancy you will be put to flight in three or four days."

Fran threw back her head and laughed silently while they stared at her in blank perplexity.

Fran regained composure to say coolly, "I was just laughing." Then she stepped to her father's chair and handed him the sheet she had drawn from the typewriter. The upper part was an unfinished letter to the Chicago mission, just as Grace had left it in her haste to get rid of Fran. At odd variance with its philanthropic message were the words Fran had pounded out for the deception of Mrs. Gregory.

Hamilton Gregory glared at them at first uncomprehendingly, then in growing amazement. They read —

"Ask her why she sent Bob Clinton to Springfield."

He started up. "What is this?" he exclaimed wildly, extending the paper toward Grace.

She read it, and smiled coldly. "Yes," she said, "the little spy has even ferreted that out, has she! Very well, she won't be so cool when Mr. Clinton returns from Springfield."

"From Springfield!" echoed Gregory, aghast. "From Springfield. Mr. Gregory, I have made the discovery that this Fran, whom you imagine only about sixteen years old, and the daughter of an old friend, is really of age. She's nothing but a circus-girl. You thought her joking when she called herself a lion-tamer; that's the way she meant for us to take it—but she can't deceive me. She's nothing but a show-girl pretending to come from Springfield. But I know better. So I've sent Mr. Clinton there to find out all about the family of your friend, and in particular about the girl that this Fran is impersonating."

"You sent Bob Clinton to Springfield!" gasped Gregory, as if his mind could get no further than that. Then he turned savagely upon Fran— "And did you tell her about Springfield?"

Fran smiled her crooked smile.

Grace interposed: "You may be sure she didn't! Do you think she wanted her history cleared up? Mr. Gregory, you have been blind all the time; this girl never saw Springfield. She's a complete fraud. Since you are so blinded by what she says that you won't investigate her claims, I decided to do this for your sake. When Mr. Clinton comes back, it's good-by to this circus-girl!"

Fran looked at her father inscrutably. "I believe, after this," she said, "it will be safe to leave you two together."

CHAPTER XVII

SHALL THE SECRET BE TOLD?

Fran had expected Robert Clinton's return in four or five days, as had Grace Noir, but secrets that have been buried for many years are not picked up in a day. However, had the chairman of the school-board returned the day after his departure, Abbott Ashton would have met him at the station. Twice, in the opinion of Fran, the young man had failed her by allowing Grace's mind to flash to important discoveries along the path of his insulated remarks about the weather. This third test was more equal, since he was to deal with no Grace Noir—merely with a man.

As Littleburg had only one railroad, and it a "branch", it was not difficult to meet every train; moreover, Miss Sapphira's hasty notes from her brother kept Abbott advised. At first, Miss Sapphira said, "It will be a week;" later—"Ten days more—and the business left like this!" Then came the final bulletin: "I may come to-morrow. Look for me when you see me."

What the secret was that Abbott must prevent Clinton from divulging, he did not care to guess; doubtless the picture of Gregory's past, with its face to the wall, might be inscribed, "Some other woman." For surely Grace Noir was some other woman. Having admitted the truth to himself, he wondered that all the world did not see—or was it that all the world needed a Fran to open eyes willfully blind?

With these thoughts, Abbott met the evening train, to see Robert Clinton hastily emerge from the solitude he had endured in the midst of many.

Robert was in no pacific mood, and when he found himself almost in the arms of Abbott, his greeting was boisterous because impatient at being stopped. Abbott, knowing that Robert was not ordinarily effusive, thought, "He has the secret!"

Robert shook hands without delaying progress toward the waiting hack, bearing Abbott along on waves of greeting.

"But surely you are not going to *ride!"* Abbott expostulated.

"Business—very pressing—see you later."

"But I have business with you, Mr. Clinton, that can't wait. Come, walk with me to town and I'll explain; it'll delay you only a few minutes."

Like a restive horse on finding himself restrained, Robert Clinton lifted a leg without advancing. "Oh, very well," he agreed. "In fact, I've something important for *you,* old fellow, and I'll explain before I—before the—yes, *before,"* he ended, turning his back upon the hack with a smothered growl.

They penetrated the silent by-streets of the outskirts of Littleburg, Robert going as fast as he could drag his companion, and Abbott walking as slowly as he could hold back the other.

"Lucky I was at the station," Abbott exclaimed, "since you've something to tell me, Bob. What is it?" In thus addressing his old friend as "Bob" the young man was officially declaring that their relationship as teacher and school-director was for ever at an end, and they stood as man to man.

Clinton spoke rapidly, with his wonted bruskness: "Guess you know I've been knocking about the country for the last three or four weeks—saw a good many old friends—a fellow can't go anywhere without meeting somebody he knows—curious, isn't it? Well, I've got an opening for you. You know how sorry I am because we had to plump another teacher on to your job, but don't you worry if Fran *did* hold your hand—just you keep your hands in your pockets after this, when there's danger— Say! I've got something lots better for you than Littleburg. School out in Oklahoma—rich—private man behind it—he owns the whole plant, and he's determined to run it to suit the new ideas. This rich man— chum of mine—went West, bought land, sat on it, got up with his jeans full of money. Wants you to come *at* once."

Abbott was elated. "What kind of new ideas, Bob?" he asked joyously.

"Oh, that impractical nonsense of teaching life instead of books—I guess it's as much an advance over the common thing, as teaching words instead of a, b, c's. You know what I mean, but I don't think *I* do. Don't worry about it now—something terrible's on my mind—just awful! I can't think of anything else. What you want to do is to scoot out to Tahlelah, Oklahoma, to this address—here's his card—tell 'em

Bob sent you—" He looked at Abbott feverishly, as if almost hoping Abbott would bolt for Tahlelah then and there. His broad red face was set determinedly.

"This news is splendid!" Abbott declared enthusiastically. "I had already applied for a country school; I was afraid I had lost out a whole year, on account of—everything. I must thank—"

"Abbott, I don't want to be thanked, I haven't got time to be thanked. Yonder's Hamilton Gregory's house and that's where I'm bound—good night—"

"But, Bob, I haven't told you my business—"

"I'll hear it later, old fellow—dear old fellow—I think a heap of you, old Abb. But I must go now—"

"No, you mustn't. Before you go into that house, we must have a little talk. We can't talk here—people are coming and going—"

"*I* don't want to talk here, bless you! I want to go in that house. My business is private and pressing." The gate was but a few yards away; he looked at it fixedly, but Abbott held his hand upon the agitated arm.

"Bob, what I have to tell you can't wait, and that's all about it. I won't keep you long, just turn down this alley with me, for it's a matter of life and death."

"Confound your life and death! *My* business is life and death, too."

At that moment, a light was turned on in Gregory's library, and Grace Noir was seen to pass the window.

Abbott's hand tightened on the other's arm, as he urged, "Down that alley, a nice dark place for talking—"

"'Nice dark', be hanged!" growled Robert. "What business can you have with me that wouldn't wait till morning? Look here, I'm desperate!"

"So am I," retorted Abbott. "Bob, you've been to Springfield."

Robert Clinton snatched open the yard-gate, muttering, "That's my business."

"Miss Noir sent you to unearth a secret."

"Oh!" exclaimed Robert, in an altered tone, stopping in the gateway, "did *she* tell you about it?"

"No—but you've brought back that secret, and you must not tell it to Miss Noir."

"Not tell her? That's funny!" Robert produced a sound which he expected to pass as laughter. "So that's what you wanted to tell me, is it? Do you know what the secret is?"

"I do not. But you mustn't tell it."

"However, that's what I'm going to do, as soon as I reach that door— take your hand off, man, my blood's up, by George! Can't you see my blood's up? It's a-boiling, that's what it's doing! So all you want is to ask me not to tell that secret?"

"Not exactly all."

"Well, well—quick! What else?"

"To see that you don't tell it."

"How do you mean to 'see' that I don't tell it?"

"You will listen to reason, Bob," said Abbott persuasively.

"No, I won't!" cried Robert. "Not me! *No, sir!* I'm going to tell this minute."

"You shall not!" said Abbott, in a lower and more compelling tone. His manner was so absolute, that Robert Clinton, who had forced his way almost to the porch-steps, was slightly moved.

"See here, Abbott—say! Fran knows all about it, and you pretend to think a good deal of her. Well, it's to her interests for the whole affair to be laid open to the world."

"I think so much of Fran," was the low and earnest rejoinder, "that if I were better fixed, I'd ask her to marry me without a moment's delay. And I think enough of her, not to ask her to marry me, until I have a good position. Now it was Fran who asked me to see that you didn't betray the secret. And I think so much of her, that I'm going to see that you don't!"

For a moment Clinton was silent; then he said in desperation: "Where is your nice dark alley? Come on, then, let's get in it!"

When they were safe from interruption, Clinton resumed: "You tell me that Fran wants that secret kept? I'd think she'd want it told everywhere. This secret is nothing at all but the wrong that was done Fran and her mother. And since you are so frank about how you like Fran, I'll follow suit and say that I have asked Grace Noir to marry me, and I know I'll stand a better show by getting her out of the hypnotic spell of that miserable scoundrel who poses as a bleating sheep—"

Abbott interrupted: "The wrong done Fran? How do you mean?"

"Why, man, that—that hypocrite in wool, that weed that infests the ground, that—"

"In short, Mr. Gregory? But what about the wrong done Fran?"

"Ain't I telling you? That worm-eaten pillar of the church that's made me lose so much faith in religion that I ain't got enough left worth the postage stamp to mail it back to the revival meeting where it come from—"

"For heaven's sake, Bob, tell me what wrong Mr. Gregory did Fran!"

"Didn't he marry Fran's mother when he was a college chap in Springfield, and then desert her? Didn't he marry again, although his first wife—Fran's mother—was living, and hadn't been divorced? Don't he refuse to acknowledge Fran as his daughter, making her pass herself off as the daughter of some old college chum? That's what he did, your choir-leader! I'd like to see that baton of his laid over his back; I'd like to lay it, myself."

It was impossible for Abbott to receive all this as a whole; he took up the revelations one at a time. "Is it possible that Fran is Mr. Gregory's *daughter?"*

"Oh, she's his, all right, only child of his only legal wife—that's why she came, thinking her father would do the right thing, him that's always praying to be guided aright, and balking whenever the halter's pulled straight."

"Then," Abbott stammered, "Mrs. Gregory is…"

"Yap; *is* with a question mark. But there's one thing she isn't; she isn't the legal wife of this pirate what's always a-preying upon the consciences of folks that thinks they're worse than him."

"As for Mr. Gregory," Abbott began sternly—

Robert pursued the name with a vigorous expletive, and growled, "One thing Mr. Gregory *has* done for me, he's opened the flood-gates that have been so long dammed—yes, I say dammed—I say—"

"Bob," Abbott exclaimed, "don't you understand Fran's object in keeping the secret? It's on account of Mrs. Gregory. If *she* finds it out—that she's not legally married—don't you see? Of course it would be to Fran's interests—bless her heart! What a—what a Nonpareil!"

"'Tain't natural," returned Clinton, "for any girl to consult the interests of the woman that's supplanted her mother. No, Fran's afraid to have it told for fear she'd be injured by your cut-glass paragon, your religion-stuffed pillow that calls itself a man."

"Fran afraid? That's a joke! I tell you, she's thinking only of Mrs.
Gregory."

"I'm sorry for Mrs. Gregory," Robert allowed, "but Grace Noir is more to me than any other woman on earth. You don't see the point. When I think of a girl like Grace Noir living under the same roof with that— that—"

"Mr. Gregory," Abbott supplied.

"—And she so pure, so high, so much above us….It makes me crazy. And all the time she's been breathing the same air, she's thought him a Moses in the Wilderness, and us nothing but the sticks. Think of her believing in that jelly pulp, that steel engraving in a Family Bible! No, I mean to open her eyes, and get her out of his spider's web."

"I see your point of view."

"You do if you have eyes. Think of that perfect angel—but just say *Grace Noir* and you've called all the virtues. And her in his house!—"

"You still believe in angels?" inquired Abbott gravely.

"Yap; and devils with long sort-of-curly hair, and pretty womanish faces, and voices like molasses."

"But Fran wants Mrs. Gregory spared—"

"Abbott, when I think of Grace Noir spending one more night under the roof of that burrowing mole, that crocodile with tears in his eyes and the rest of him nothing but bone and gristle—"

"Bob, if I assure you that Miss Noir will never spend another day under his roof, will you agree to keep this discovery to yourself?"

"You can't make no such assurance. If she ain't put wise to what branch of the animal kingdom he twigs to, she'll not leave his roof."

"Bob, if she leaves that house in the morning, for ever, won't you agree to silence, for Mrs. Gregory's sake—and because Fran asks it?"

"Fran's another angel, bless her heart! But you can't work it."

"Leave it to me, Bob. I'll be guided by the spur of the moment."

"I need a bookkeeper at my store," Robert said, ruminating.

"I promise you that Miss Noir will soon be open to offers."

"See here, Abbott, I can't afford to lose any chances on this thing. I'm going into that house before this night passes, and I'm going to see the feathers fly. No—I don't want Mrs. Gregory to learn about it, any more than you or Fran; but I'll limit the thing to Grace—"

"She'd tell Mrs. Gregory."

"Don't you say anything against Grace Noir, Abbott, for though you are my friend—"

"I say nothing against her; I say only that she's a woman."

"Well," Clinton reluctantly agreed, "I reckon she is. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll go with you into that wolf's den, and I'll let you do all the talking; and if you can manage things in half an hour—just thirty minutes by my watch—so that Grace leaves there to-morrow, I'll leave you to steer things, and it's mum for keeps. But I'm going to be present, though I don't want to say one word to that—that—But if he don't crawl out of his wool far enough to suit the purpose, in short, if he don't cave, and in half an hour —"

"Half an hour will do the business," said Abbott stoutly. "Come!"

"Be sure to call for Mr. Gregory by himself," said Robert, as they walked swiftly back to the Gregory residence. "If Grace comes into the room while we're talking, or Mrs. Gregory—"

"If they do," Abbott said quickly, "you are not to utter one word, *not one,* about Springfield—you understand? It's the bargain, and I shall hold you to your word of honor."

"For half an hour I won't say a word," Clinton declared, "unless it's some word just drawn out of my bosom by the sight of that villain. Come!"

CHAPTER XVIII

JUST THIRTY MINUTES

During the weeks spent by Robert Clinton in search of Fran's life- secret, a consciousness of absence and its cause was like a hot iron branding Gregory's brain. What a mocking fatality, that it should have been Grace to send Robert on his terrible errand,—an errand which must result in ruin! Whenever Gregory tried to anticipate results, he stood appalled; hour by hour his mind was ever darting forward into the future, trying to build it of related parts of probabilities.

Mrs. Gregory would be pitied when it became known how she had been deceived; Fran would be pitied because she was a disowned daughter; Grace would be pitied for trusting in the integrity of her employer,— but Gregory, who of all men needed pity most, would be utterly despised. He did not think of himself alone, but of his works of charity—they, too, would fall, in his disgrace, and Walnut Street church—even religion itself—would be discredited because of an exposure that could avail nothing.

Gregory had been too long proclaiming the living God not to feel Him as a Presence, and in this Presence he felt a shuddering fear that could suggest no relief but propitiation. He as well as Abbott Ashton had kept himself informed of Robert's movements as far as they were known to Miss Sapphira, hence the day of Robert's return found his thought of atonement at its most frenzied stage.

As evening wore on, he made up his mind to the fatal step.

Before Robert could expose him, Gregory would confess. It had seemed inevitable since learning of the school-director's mission; but he could not shorten, by one hour, the sweet comradeship in the library. Now that the last hour had come, he sought his wife, reeling like a sick man as he descended the hall stairs.

Mrs. Gregory was softly playing an old hymn, when he discovered her presence in the brilliantly lighted parlor. Grace was expecting a visit from Clinton and had made the room cheerful for his coming, and Mrs. Gregory, looking in and finding no one present, had sunk upon the stool before the piano. She did not see her husband, for her face was bent low as she feelingly played, *I Need Thee Every Hour*.

Gregory, well-nigh overwhelmed with the realization of what he meant to do, grasped the door for support. Presently he spoke, brokenly, "Lucy, how true that is—we do, indeed, need Him every hour."

She did not start at his voice, though his presence had been unsuspected. She raised her serious eyes, and observed his haggard face. "Mr. Gregory, you are ill."

"No—the light hurts my eyes." He turned off the lights and drew a chair near her. The room was partly revealed by an electric arc that swung at the street corner—its mellowed beams entered the open window. "Lucy, I have something very important to say to you."

Her fingers continued to wander among the keys, making the hymn barely audible, then letting it die away, only to be revived. She supposed it was the old matter of her going to church—but since her name had been taken "off the book", what was left to be said?

"Lucy, I have never spoken of this before, but it has seemed to me for a long time that we have wandered rather far apart—yes, very far apart. We sit close together, alone, our hands could touch, but our souls live in different worlds. Do you ever feel that way?"

She ceased playing abruptly, and answered almost in a whisper, "Yes."

"Perhaps it is my fault," said Gregory, "although I know that if you had taken more interest in what interests me, if you had been true to the Faith as I have tried to be—"

"I have been true to you," said Mrs. Gregory.

"Of course—of course—there is no question of our being true to each other. But it's because you have alienated yourself from what I look upon as the only duty in life, that we have drifted—and you could have prevented that. I feel that I am not wholly to blame, Lucy, it has been my fault and it has been your fault—that is how I look at it."

There was silence, then she said, "There seems nothing to be done."

"How do you mean? You speak as if our love were dead and buried—"

She rose abruptly, saying, "And its grave unmarked."

"Sit down, Lucy—I haven't told you what I came to tell—you must listen and try to see it as I see it. Let us be reasonable and discuss the future in a—in a sensible and matter-of-fact way. If you will agree —"

"I will not agree to it," she answered firmly. "Let me go, Mr. Gregory, there is no need ever to bring up that subject."

He had risen, and now in blank amazement, he stared at her, repeating, "You will not agree to it? To what? You are unreasonable. What subject have I brought up?"

"It is very true that we have drifted too far apart to be as we were in the beginning. But there is still something left to me, and this something I shall cling to as long as I can. I mean to avoid the publicity, the open exposure, the shame of—of—a neglected wife."

"My God!" whispered Gregory, falling back, "then somebody has told you about Springfield—it was Fran!"

"I don't know what you mean," she returned, apparently without emotion. "What *I* mean is, that I shall never consent to a divorce."

"A divorce? Good heavens, Lucy, are you mad? Do you think I want a separation because you disown the church? What have I ever done to make you imagine such an absurdity?"

She answered gently, "Yes, it seems I misunderstood. But you said you wanted me to discuss the future in a matter-of-fact way, and I couldn't think of the future as having any other matter-of-fact solution."

Gregory was hotly indignant. "Lucy, if that is meant as an insinuation against—"

Mrs. Gregory raised her hand compellingly. "Do not speak any name," she said, looking at him steadily. "I can endure much," she went on, in a milder tone, finding him silent; "I often wonder if many women could endure as silently—but there must never be a name mentioned between us."

Her manner was so unwontedly final, that he stood looking at her, not knowing how to resume the pressing subject of his past. They were in that same silent attitude when Grace Noir came in from the hall.

Grace turned up the lights, and then—"Oh!" It was impossible to prevent an unpleasant compression of the mouth at discovering Gregory so near his wife. "Am I in the way? I am looking for company, and I heard the door-bell—please excuse me!" she added, biting off the words.

"Of course you are not in the way," Gregory returned desperately. "Company, you say? And you heard the door-bell—is Bob Clinton—" He grew white. "My eyes are bad, for some reason," he muttered, and switched off the lights again.

"How very dark you have it in here!" said Grace reprovingly. "Of course Mr. Clinton has been shown in the back-parlor, where it is light. I will go to him there, and leave you two—" she paused irresolutely, but neither spoke.

Grace had no sooner gone than Gregory with an effort found his voice. "Lucy, my conscience has tormented me until it will not let me rest— about you. It's your right to know something more about my life than I have ever told—"

"Right in there," said the maid's voice, from the hall, and Abbott Ashton and Robert Clinton entered the half-light.

While Robert was greeting Mrs. Gregory with exaggerated pleasure, in order to escape facing her husband, Abbott spoke to the other with an odd sense of meanness, as if he partook, by mere nearness, of the other's cowardice. "I wish to speak to you for a few minutes, Mr. Gregory."

Gregory, like an animal brought to bay, said, "I suppose you've some excuse about playing cards with Fran."

"More important than playing cards," Abbott returned. He could not meet the eyes of this man he had once highly venerated—it was like beholding an ideal divested of imagined beauty, shivering in the shame of its nakedness.

Gregory fought off the inevitable: "If you refer to losing your position at the public school—"

"No. Clinton has come home from Springfield, and we have a matter—"

"It's pressing business," spoke up Robert, who all this time had been asking Mrs. Gregory if her mother was well, if Simon Jefferson was no worse, if Fran was hearty, if Grace Noir was at home—"and private business."

Abbott looked warningly at his friend to remind him of his promise not to utter a word. Robert, remembering, tightly compressed his lips, and marched over to the piano. He leaned upon it heavily.

"I have no business," Mr. Gregory exclaimed, in fear, "that my wife need not know."

"This is—" cried Robert. Then remembering, he struck the keys a resounding chord.

Mrs. Gregory was about to leave the room.

"No, no!" exclaimed Mr. Gregory, starting to the door to intercept her, "I want you to stay. I'll have no secrets from you, Lucy. I want you to hear what these gentlemen have to say." He glared at Abbott as if daring him to speak the words that must destroy his wife's last feeble hold on her position.

"I hope Mrs. Gregory will excuse us," said Abbott, smiling at her as cheerfully as he could, "but she knows that there are matters of business that women don't understand, or care to learn. This is something that relates merely to you, Mr. Gregory, and ourselves."

"Of course I understand you, Abbott," said Mrs. Gregory gently, "and Mr. Gregory is wrong to insist on my interrupting—women are always in the way—" She smiled, and, slipping around Gregory, had reached the door, when she came face to face with Grace Noir, entering. At sight of her—for Grace did not pause, but went over to the piano—Mrs. Gregory apparently reconsidered, and stepped to her husband's side.

"So you did come," Grace said, smiling at Robert. "Shall we go into the other room?"

Robert reveled in her beauty, and to that extent his anger against Gregory flamed higher. "Pretty soon," he said, "pretty soon, Miss Grace—in just twenty minutes—" he looked at his watch, then at Abbott.

"I must tell you, Mr. Gregory," Abbott began rapidly, "that I had just thirty minutes to consummate the matter with you,—just half an hour, when we came here, and ten minutes are already gone. Only twenty minutes are left."

"What do you mean by your twenty minutes being left?" Gregory blustered.

Abbott spoke carefully, at the same time drawing a little farther away from the man he despised: "Bob has been to Springfield about that matter, you understand."

"No, I don't," cried Gregory. "Or if I do—tell it out—all of it."

"He has been to Springfield," Abbott went on, "and he got on the inside of the business, and the interests are determined that—that they will retaliate on you for your successes in the past, and at the same time be a help to Bob."

"I don't understand," Gregory gasped blankly.

"Me neither," muttered Robert.

"It's very simple," Abbott maintained. "The Springfield interests want to give you a blow, and give Bob a helping hand. Therefore, you are to transfer your secretary to his store, where a bookkeeper is needed."

"Oh, indeed," interposed Grace Noir icily. "I am a mere pawn, I presume, to be sent where I am wanted. But I would like to ask Mr. Clinton if he found out anything about Fran, while he was in Springfield?"

"Fran is all she claims to be," Robert declared bluntly.

"All? You can prove she's no fraud?"

"My pockets are full of proofs," Robert exclaimed, looking significantly at Gregory.

"Dear Fran!" murmured Mrs. Gregory with a sweet smile of reminiscence.

"Abbott," Mr. Gregory gasped, as he began to realize the compromise that was offered, "you have always been my friend—and you have been interested in my charities—you know how important my secretary is to my work. It is true that I did wrong, years ago—very wrong—it is true that I bitterly—what shall I say?—antagonized the interests at Springfield. But that was so long ago. Am I to be

punished now—"

"Mr. Gregory," said Abbott, clearly and forcibly, "I have nothing to do with any punishment, I have nothing to do with demanding the release of your secretary. I am a mere agent of the interests, sent to you to demand that your secretary be dismissed in the morning; and if you can not see your way to promise me now that you will dismiss her, my office is ended. If you can promise to send her away, I give you my word the transactions shall be for ever hushed up, so far as we are concerned. If you can not promise, all will be revealed at once."

"In just ten minutes," said Robert Clinton, consulting his watch.

Grace stood looking at Gregory as if turned to stone. She had listened intently to every word as it fell from Abbott's lips, but not once had she turned her head to look at him.

"You are cruel," Gregory flared out, "you are heartless. If I send away the only one who is in perfect knowledge and sympathy with my work—"

"Then you refuse?"

"Of course I refuse. I'll not permit the work of years to perish because of an unreasonable and preposterous demand. You wouldn't exchange your position here for Bob's grocery, would you, Miss Grace?" he ended appealingly.

"Yes—if you dismiss me," Grace answered, her eyes smoldering.

"Lucy"—Gregory was almost beside himself—"tell her she must stay— tell these men we can not go on with our work, without her."

Not for worlds would Mrs. Gregory have betrayed eagerness for Grace to go, but for no consideration would she have asked her to stay. "Mr. Gregory," she responded, "I can not conceive of your being in the power of business interests to such an extent as to drive you to do anything that seems like taking your heart's blood."

"I refuse!" cried Gregory, again. "Of course I refuse."

"Very well," said Abbott, turning.

"But what are you going to do?" Gregory asked shrinkingly.

"I shall go now; my endeavor to straighten out things—or rather to keep everything peaceful and forgotten—comes to nothing, it seems. Good evening, Mrs. Gregory."

"But wait! Wait! Let us discuss this alone—"

"It is useless now, for the time has expired."

"That's right," Clinton confirmed; clicking to his watch.

"And all of it is going to be told? Everything?"

"Unless you will dismiss your secretary."

"But you insult Miss Grace to speak in that way. Good heavens, Abbott, what are you doing? How can you insult that—the best woman in the world?"

There was a moment's silence. Then Mrs. Gregory turned to her husband and said quietly, "If Miss Noir is the best woman in the world, you should be the last man in the world to say so."

He covered his face with his hands. "Everybody has turned against me," he complained. "I am the most miserable man on earth because for mere caprice, for mere spite, for no earthly good, it is the determination of people who have lost positions and the like, to drive me wild."

Robert Clinton thumped the keys of the piano with one hand.

"Why, hello, Mr. Bob!" cried Fran, dancing into forgotten—comes to nothing, it seems. Good evening, Mrs. Gregory."

"But wait! Wait! Let us discuss this alone—"
"It is useless now, for the time has expired."

"That's right," Clinton confirmed; clicking to his watch.

"And all of it is going to be told? Everything?"

"Unless you will dismiss your secretary."

"But you insult Miss Grace to speak in that way. Good heavens, Abbott, what are you doing? How can you insult that—the best woman in the world?"

There was a moment's silence. Then Mrs. Gregory turned to her husband and said quietly, "If Miss Noir is the best woman in the world, you should be the last man in the world to say so."

He covered his face with his hands. "Everybody has turned against me," he complained. "I am the most miserable man on earth because for mere caprice, for mere spite, for no earthly good, it is the determination of people who have lost positions and the like, to drive me wild."

Robert Clinton thumped the keys of the piano with one hand.

"Why, hello, Mr. Bob!" cried Fran, dancing into the room. "So you're back, are you?" She shook hands breezily.

"Come back, Abbott, come back!" called Gregory, discovering that the young man was indeed going, "You know what I *must* do, if you drive me to the wall. I am obliged to do what you say. State the condition again if you have the courage to say it aloud."

"The past will be forgotten," said Abbott solemnly, "if you give your word that your secretary shall go in the morning."

"And you'll take me in her place," spoke up Fran decidedly.

"The time is up," said Clinton harshly, "It's too late now, for I shall tell—"

"I promise, I promise!" Gregory cried out, in an agony of fear. "I promise. Yes, I'll dismiss her. Yes, she shall go! Yes, let Fran *have* the place."

"Do I understand you to dismiss me, Mr. Gregory?" asked Grace, in a low concentrated tone, leaning slightly forward.

Fran turned on the lights to their fullest extent, and looked about with an elfish smile.

Hamilton Gregory was mute.

"I have your promise," said Abbott, bowing gravely. "That is enough."

"Yes," groaned Gregory, "but it is infamous."

Fran looked at Abbott inscrutably. "Third time's the charm," she said, in a whisper. "I'm proud of you this time, Abbott."

Grace turned with cold dignity, and moved slowly toward the hall door.

Fran slipped between Clinton and the piano, and began to play softly, carelessly with one hand, while she watched the retreating figure.

In a very short time, Gregory found himself alone in the parlor. Abbott and Clinton had withdrawn rather awkwardly, Mrs. Gregory had melted away unobtrusively, and Fran, last of all, had given the piano a final bang, and darted out of the house.

Gregory stood pale and miserable. It seemed as if all the world had deserted him. The future without Grace would be as dreary as now seemed his past with Fran's mother. He suffered horribly. Was suffering all that life had left for him? Perhaps he was reaping—but is there no end to the harvest? One sows in so brief a time; is the garnering eternal?

A bell rang, but he was not curious. Voices sounded at the front door, footsteps passed, then silence once more—silence and despair. Gregory went to the open window, and leaned heavily on the sill, taking great breaths, staring dully.

Footsteps were heard again! They were near by. They stopped at the door—they were *hers.* Gregory started up with a low cry of reanimated hope. Whatever happened—he was about to see Grace Noir once more.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIRST VICTORY

When Grace reentered the parlor, to find Hamilton Gregory alone, her eyes were full of reproach without tenderness. He dropped his head before her accusing face, but, all the same, he felt a buoyant relief because she was there.

As she came straight toward him, an open letter in her hand, his body grew erect, and his brown eyes, losing their glazed light, burned from the depths.

"Read it," Grace said, in a thin brittle voice.

In taking the letter, Gregory touched her hand. With recaptured alertness, he held the missive to the light, and read:

"MY DEAR MISS NOIR:— "This is to officially offer you the position of bookkeeper at my grocery store, now that Hamilton Gregory has decided to make Fran his secretary. Come over early in the morning and everything will be arranged to your satisfaction. I am, ROBERT CLINTON."

Gregory looked up, and marked the fixedness of her gaze. It seemed to call upon him to avenge an insult. He could only bluster, "Who brought this thing here?" He flung the note upon the table.

"A messenger." Grace's look did not waver.

"The impudence!" he exclaimed. "The affront!"

"However," said Grace, "I presume it is final that I am dismissed?"

"But his unseemly haste in sending this note—it's infamous, that's what I call it, infamous!"

"And you mean to take Fran in my place, do you not?"

"You see," Gregory explained, "Bob Clinton came back to town this evening from Springfield, you understand, and Abbott came with him— er—and Mrs. Gregory was in the room so they could not speak exactly openly, and Abbott made the condition—I can hardly explain so delicate an affair of—of business—but you see, Bob is evidently very much in love with you, and he has it in his power to demand—"

Grace calmly waited for the other to lapse into uncertain silence, then said, "This note tells me definitely that I am offered another position, but you tell me nothing. It was I who sent Mr. Clinton to Springfield to look into the private record of that Fran."

"You see," Gregory explained, "he was afraid I might think it presumptuous of him to do that, it was like doubting my word, so he came to me—however, he is back and there is nothing to reveal, absolutely nothing to reveal."

"Is he sure that the girl is no impostor?"

"He knows she isn't. His pockets are full of proofs. I know you sent Bob on my account, Grace, but alas! Fran is a reality—she can't be dismissed."

"It seems I can be. But of course I am nothing."

"Grace! You are everything."

She laughed. "Everything! At the word of an Abbott Ashton, a disgraced school-teacher, you make me less than nothing!"

He cried out impetuously, "Shall I tell you why we must part?"

Grace returned with a somber look, "So Fran is to have my place!"

Gregory interposed passionately, "It is because I love you."

"So Fran is to be your secretary!" she persisted.

"Grace, you have read my heart, I have read yours; we thought we could associate in safety, after that

—but I am weak. You never come into the room that I am not thrilled with rapture. Life hasn't any brightness for me except your presence. What can I do but protect you?"

"Mr. Gregory, Fran hasn't any interest in your work."

"I love you, Grace—I adore you. Beautiful darling—don't you see you must go away because you are so inexpressibly precious to me? That's why I mustn't have you under my roof." He sank upon his knees and caught her hand. "See me at your feet—should this thing be?"

Grace coldly withdrew her hand. "In spite of all you say, you have engaged Fran in my place."

"No one can take your place, dear."

Grace's voice suddenly vibrated: "You tell me you love me, yet you agree to hire that woman, in my place—the woman I hate, I tell you; yes, the spy, the enemy of this home."

"Yes, Grace, I do tell you that I love you—would I be kneeling here worshiping you, otherwise? And what is more, you know that you love me—you know it. That's why I must send you away."

"Then send Fran away, when you send me away."

"Oh, my God, if I could!" he exclaimed, starting up wildly. "But you see, it's impossible. I can't do that, and I can't keep you."

"Why is it impossible? Must you treat better the daughter of an old college friend, than the woman you say you love? What are those mysterious Springfield interests?"

"—And you are the woman who loves me!" Gregory interrupted quickly. "Say it, Grace! Tell me you love me before you go away—just those three words before I sink back into my lonely despair. We will never be alone together in this life—tell me, then, that you love me—let me hear those words from your beautiful lips—"

"It makes me laugh!" Grace cried out in wrath that could not be controlled, "to hear you speak of love in one breath and of Fran in the next. Maybe some day you'll speak both in the same breath! Yes, I will go and you can hire your Fran."

"But won't you tell me good-by?" he pleaded. "As soon as I have become complete master of my love for you, Fran shall be sent unceremoniously about her business. I fancy Abbott Ashton wants to marry her—let him take her away. Then she will be gone. Then my—er—duty—to friendship will be fulfilled. And if you will come back again then, we might be happy together, after all."

She stamped her foot violently. "This need not be, and you know it. You speak of being master of yourself. What do you mean? I already know you love me. What is there to hide?"

"But others would see. Others would suspect. Others would betray. Good heavens, Grace, all my life has been made horribly miserable because I've always had to be considering what others would think and do!"

"Betray? What is there to betray? Nothing. You are what you have always been, and so am I. We didn't commit a crime in speaking the truth for once—you are sending me away for ever, and yet you try to temporize on this eternity. Well—keep your Fran! It's fortunate for me that I have *one* friend." She snatched up the open letter, and hurried toward the door.

"Grace!" Gregory followed her imploringly, "not Bob Clinton! Hear me,
Grace. If you ever marry that man, I shall kill myself."

She laughed scornfully as she snatched open the door.

"Grace, I tell you that Fran—"

"Yes!" exclaimed the other, her voice trembling with concentrated anger, "let that be the last word between us, for it is that, and that only which separates us. Yes—*that Fran!"*

CHAPTER XX

THE ENEMY TRIUMPHS

Sometimes the history of any household progresses rapidly in closely related scenes of action; but, for the most part, months pass by during which life has apparently ceased to act. Everything that had seemed tending toward catastrophe stopped, as it were, with the departure of Grace Noir. Possibly the climax was still ahead; if so, the waters were at present heaped high on this side of ultimate disaster, and on the other side, leaving, between past and future, a dry no-thoroughfare.

Old Mrs. Jefferson would long ago have struck a blow against Grace Noir had she not recognized the fact that when one like Grace wears the helmet of beauty and breastplate of youth, the darts of the very angles of justice, who are neither beautiful nor young, are turned aside. Helplessly Mrs. Jefferson had watched and waited and now, behold! there was no more Dragon. Fran had said she would do it—nothing could have exceeded the confidence of the old lady in the new secretary.

Mrs. Gregory's sense of relief was not so profound as her mother's, because she could not think of Grace's absence except as a reprieve. Surely she would return—but the present was to be placidly enjoyed. To observers, Mrs. Gregory appeared ever placid, not because of indifference, but, as it was supposed, from blindness. Under the calm exterior of the wronged wife, there seemed no smoldering fire awaiting a favorable wind. In truth, she was always fearing that people would discover her husband's sentimental bearing toward his secretary—and always hoping that if they did, they would conclude the wife understood best and felt no alarm.

In the meantime, Grace was gone. Mrs. Gregory's smile once more reminded Fran of the other's half-forgotten youth. When a board has laid too long on the ground, one finds, on its removal, that the grass is withered; all the same, the grass feels the sunshine.

Fran thanked herself that Grace was no longer silhouetted against the horizon, and Gregory, remarking this attitude of self-congratulation, was thrown more than ever out of sympathy with his daughter. Fran was indefatigable in her duties as secretary, but her father felt that it was not the same. She could turn out an immense amount of work because she was strong and playing for high stakes—but she did not have Grace's methodical ways—one never knew how Fran would do anything, only that she would do it. Grace was all method, but more than that she was, as Gregory phrased it to himself—she was all Grace.

Gregory missed her every minute of the day, and the harder Fran tried to fill her place, the more he resented it. He divined that Fran hated the routine, the monotonous forms of charity, the duplicated copies of kind acts, the rows of figures representing so many unfortunates. Instead of acknowledging to himself that his daughter did the work from a yearning for his love, from a resolution to save him from the Grace-infatuation by absent treatment, he perversely rebelled at her secretly rejoicing over a conquered foe. Fran was separated from his sympathies by the chasm in his own soul.

The time came when Gregory felt that he must see Grace again and be alone with her. At first, he had thought they must not meet apart from the world; but by the end of the week, he was wondering what excuse he could offer to induce her to meet him—not at Miss Sapphira's, where she now boarded, not at the grocery where Bob was always hovering about—but somewhere remote, somewhere safe, where they might talk about—but he had no idea of the conversation that might ensue; there was nothing definite in anything save his fixed thought of being with her. As to any harm, there could be none. He had so long regarded Grace as the best woman in the world, that even after the day of kisses, his mind continued in its inertia of faith,—even the gravitation of material facts were unable to check its sublime course.

It was at the close of a July day that Hamilton Gregory left his house resolved, at any cost—save that of exposure—to experience once more the only pleasure life held in reserve for him: nearness to Grace Noir. She might be at the store, since all shops were to remain open late, in hopes of reaping sordid advantages from the gaiety of mankind. In a word, Littleburg was in the grip of its first street fair.

Before going down-town, Gregory strolled casually within sight of the Clinton boarding-house.

Only Miss Sapphira was on the green veranda. She had watched the ceaseless streams of humanity pouring along either sidewalk, destined for the heart of the small town,—countless hordes, reenforced from rural districts by excursion trains. From the very ground they seemed to spring, these

autochthones of confetti and side-shows. On they flowed, stormy with horn and whistle and hideous balloons whose horrid pipes squealed the music of modern Pan; they overwhelmed the native population with elusive tickler and rubber-stringed ball; here were to be seen weary mothers reaching forth for greater weariness; joy- scourged fathers driven to the money-changers; frenzied children at last in Fairyland.

Miss Sapphira, recognizing Gregory, waved a solemn greeting, and he felt reassured—for he was always afraid Robert—would "tell". He pushed his way nearer. Miss Sapphira sat in the huge chair not as if unable to rise, but as a tangible rebuke to carnal amusements. She spoke to Gregory on the subject of which she was full to the brim— and Miss Sapphira was of generous capacity—

"No wonder so few go to church!"

"Is Miss Noir here?" Gregory asked in a strained voice; the confusion hid the odd catch his voice had suffered in getting over the name.

"No. She's down-town—but not at any show, you may be sure. She's left late at the store because—I guess you've heard Abbott Ashton has been away a long time."

"I have heard nothing of the young man," Gregory replied stiffly.

"Well, he's been off two or three weeks somewhere, nobody knows unless it's Bob, and Bob won't tell anything any more. Abbott wrote he'd be home to-night, and Bob drove over to Simmtown to meet him in the surrey, so Miss Grace is alone down there—" She nodded ponderously.

"Alone!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

"Yes—I look for Bob and Abbott now just any minute." She added, eying the crowd—"I saw Fran on the street, long and merry ago!" Her accent was that of condemnation. Like a rock she sat, letting the fickle populace drift by to minstrel show and snake den. The severity of her double chin said they might all go thither—*she* would not; let them be swallowed up by that gigantic serpent whose tail, too long for bill-board illustration, must needs be left to coil in the imagination —but the world should see that Miss Sapphira was safe from deglutition, either of frivolity or anaconda.

That was also Gregory's point of view; and even in his joy at finding the coast clear, he paused to say, "I am sorry that Fran seems to have lost all reason over this carnival company. If she would show half as much interest in her soul's welfare—"

He left the sentence unfinished. The thought of Grace had grown supreme—it seemed to illuminate some wide and splendid road into a glorious future.

The bookkeeper's desk was in a gallery near the ceiling of the Clinton grocery store; one looked thence, through a picket-fence, down upon the only floor. Doubtless Grace, thus looking, saw him coming. When he reached her side, he was breathless, partly from his struggle through the masses, principally from excitement of fancied security.

She was posting up the ledger, and made no sign of recognition until he called her name.

"Mr. Clinton is not here," she said remotely. "Can I do anything for you?"

He admired her calm courtesy. If at the same time she could have been reserved and yielding he would have found the impossible combination perfect. Because it was impossible, he was determined to preserve her angelic purity in imagination, and to restore her womanly charm to actual being.

"How can you receive me so coldly," he said impulsively, "when I've not seen you for weeks?"

"You see me at church," she answered impersonally.

"But I have been dying to be near you, to talk to you—"

"Stop!" she held up her hand. "You should know that Mr. Clinton and I are—"

"Grace!" he groaned.

She whispered, her face suddenly growing pale, "Are engaged." The tete-a-tete was beyond her supposed strength. His melodious voice, associated in her mind with divine worship; the burning of those beautiful eyes in which she seemed to see her own love; the attitude of his arms as if, not knowing it, he were reaching out for her—all this was hard for her to resist.

"Engaged!" he echoed, as if she had pronounced one of the world's great tragedies. "Then you will

give yourself to that man—yourself, Grace, that beautiful self—and without love? It's a crime! Don't commit the horrible blunder that's ruined my life. See what wretchedness has come to me—"

"Then you think," very slowly, "that I ought to let Fran ruin my whole life because your wife has ruined yours? Then you think that after I have been driven out of the house to make room for Fran, that I ought to stay single because you married unwisely?"

"Grace, don't say you are driven out."

"What do you call it? A resignation?"

"Grace!—we have only a few moments to be alone. For pity's sake, look at me kindly and use another tone—a tone like the dear days when you were by my side.…We may never be together again."

She looked at him with the same repellent expression, and spoke in the same bitter tone: "Well, suppose we're not? You and that Fran will be together."

In his realization that it was Fran, and Fran alone, who separated them, Gregory passed into a state of anger, to which his love added recklessness. "Grace, hate me if you must, but you shall not misunderstand me!"

She laughed. "Please don't ask me to understand you, Mr. Gregory, while you hide the only secret to your understanding. Don't come to me with pretended liking when what you call 'mysterious business interests at Springfield' drive me from your door, and keep Fran at my desk."

He interposed in a low passionate voice. "I am resolved that you should know everything. Fran—is my own daughter."

She gave no sign save a sudden compression of the mouth; nevertheless, her surprise was extreme. Her mind flashed along the wires of the past and returned illuminated to the present entanglement.

He thought her merely stunned, and burst forth: "I tell you, Fran is my child. Now you know why I'm compelled to do what she wants. That's the secret Bob brought from Springfield. That's the secret Abbott Ashton hung over my head—the traitor! after I'd befriended him! All of my ungrateful friends have conspired to ruin me, to force you from me by this secret. But you know it now, and I've escaped its danger. You know it!"

"And does your wife know?"

"Would I tell her, and not tell you? It's you I've tried to shield. I married Josephine Derry, and Fran is our child. You know Fran. Well, her mother was just like her—frivolous, caring only for things of the world—irreligious. And I was just a boy—a mere college youth. When I realized the awful mistake I'd made, I thought it best just to go away and let her live her own life. Years after, I put all that behind me, and came to Littleburg. I married Mrs. Gregory and I wanted to put all my past life away—clear away—and live a good open life. Then you came. Then I found out I'd never known what love meant. It means a fellowship of souls, love does; it has nothing to do with the physical man. It means just your soul and mine…and it's too late!"

Grace, with hands locked upon her open ledger, stared straight before her, as if turned to stone. The little fenced-in box, hanging high above eager shoppers, was as a peaceful haven in a storm of raging noises. From without, gusts of merriment shrieked and whistled, while above them boomed the raucous cries of showmen, drowned in their turn by the indefatigable brass-band. The atmosphere of the bookkeeper's loft was a wedge of silence, splitting a solidarity of tumult.

Gregory covered his face with his hands. "Do you despise me, you pure angel of beauty? Oh, say you don't utterly despise me. I've not breathed this secret to any living soul but you, you whom I love with the madness of despair. My heart is broken. Tell me what I can do."

At last Grace spoke in a thin tone: "Where is that woman?"

"Fran's mother?"

She did not reply; he ought to know whom she meant.

"She died a few years ago—but I thought her dead when I married Mrs. Gregory. I didn't mean any wrong to my wife, I wanted everything legal, and supposed it was. I thought everything was all right until that awful night—when Fran came. There'd been no divorce, so Fran kept the secret—not on my account, oh, no, no, not on her father's account! She gave *me* no consideration. It was on account of Mrs. Gregory."

"Which Mrs. Gregory?"

"You know—Mrs. Gregory."

"Can you believe that?" Grace asked, with a chilled smile. "You believe Fran really cares for your wife? You think any daughter could care for the woman who has stolen her mother's rightful place?"

"But Fran won't have the truth declared; if it weren't for her, Bob would have told you long ago."

"Suppose I were in Fran's place—would I have kept the secret to spare man or woman? No! Fran doesn't care a penny for your wife. She couldn't. It would be monstrous—unnatural. But she's always hated me. *That's* why she acts as she does—to triumph over me. I see it all. *That* is the reason she won't have the truth declared—she doesn't want me to know that you are—are *free*."

Grace started up from the desk, her face deathly white. She was tottering, but when Gregory would have leaped to her side, she whispered, "They would see us." Suddenly her face became crimson. He caught his breath, speechless before her imperial loveliness.

"Mr. Gregory!" her eyes were burning into his, "have you told me all the secret?"

"Yes—all."

"Then Mr. Clinton deceived me!"

"He agreed to hide everything, if I'd send you away."

"Oh, I see! So even *he* is one of Fran's allies. Never mind—did you say that when you married the second time, your first wife was living, and had never been divorced?"

"But Grace—dear Grace! I thought it all right I believed—"

She did not seem to hear him. "Then *she* is not your wife," she said in a low whisper.

"She believes—"

"*She* believes!" Her voice rose scornfully. "And so that is the fact Fran wanted hidden; you are not really bound to Mrs. Gregory."

"Not legally—but—"

"In what way, then?"

"Why, in no regular way—I mean—but don't you see, there could be no marriage now to make it binding, without telling her—"

"You are not bound at all," Grace interrupted. "You are free—as free as air—as free as I am. Are you determined not to understand me? Since you are free, there is no obstacle, in Heaven or on earth, to your wishes."

His passage from despair to sudden hope was so violent that he grasped the desk for support. "What? —Then?—You—you—Grace, would you—But— "

"You are free," said Grace, "and since Mr. Clinton's treachery, I do not consider myself bound."

"Grace!" he cried wildly, "Grace—star of my soul—go with me, go with me, fly with me in a week—darling. Let us arrange it for to-morrow."

"No. I will not go with you, unless you take me now."

"Now? Immediately?" he gasped, bewildered.

"Without once turning back," she returned. "There's a train in something like an hour."

"For ever?" He was delirious. "And you are to be mine—Grace, you are to be mine—my very own!"

"Yes. But you are never to see Fran again."

"Do I want to see her again? But Grace, if we stay here until train- time, Bob will come and—er—and find us—I don't want to meet Bob."

"Then let us go. There are such crowds on the streets that we can easily lose ourselves."

"Bob will hunt for you, Grace, if he gets back with Abbott before ourtrain leaves. Miss Sapphira said she was looking for him any minute, and that was a good while ago."

"If you can't keep him from finding me," Grace said, "let him find. I do not consider that I am acting in the wrong. When people are not bound, they are free; and if they are free, they have the right to be happy, if at the same time, while being happy together, they can be doing good."

"Still," said Gregory, looking over the railing, "you know it would look—it would look bad, darling."

"This is the beginning of our lives," she said, with sudden joy.

"And if Bob sees me with you, Grace, after what he knows, you can guess that something very unpleasant would—"

Grace drew back, to look searchingly into his face. "Mr. Gregory," she said slowly, "you make difficulties."

He met her eyes, and his blood danced. "I make difficulties? No! Grace, you have made me the happiest man in the world. Yes, our lives begin with this night—our real lives. Grace, you're the best woman that ever lived!"

CHAPTER XXI

FLIGHT

To reach the station, they must either penetrate the heart of the town, or follow the dark streets of the outskirts. In the latter case, their association would arouse surprise and comment, but in the throng, reasonable safety might be expected. Once in the station, they might hope to pass the hour of waiting in obscurity, since that was the last place that a search would be made.

After the first intense moment of exaltation, both began to fear a possible search. Grace apparently dreaded discovery as shrinkingly as if her conscience were not clear, and Gregory, in the midst of his own perturbation, found it incongruous that she who was always right, wanted to hide. As they breasted the billows of jollity which in its vocal stress became almost materialized, there grew up within him a feeling uneasily akin to the shame of his past. Old days seemed rising from their graves to chill him with their ghastly show of skeletons of dead delights.

But Grace's hand was upon his arm, and the crowd pressed them close together—and she was always beautiful and divinely formed. The prospect of complete possession filled him with ecstasy, while Grace herself yielded to the love that had outgrown all other principles of conduct.

Grace could deceive herself about this love, could reassure her conscience with specious logic, but she never lost her coolness of judgment concerning Hamilton Gregory. His lapses from conventionality did not come from deliberate choice, and she realized the danger of letting his feverish impulse grow cold. Even the prospect of waiting one hour at the station frightened her. She must save him from that Fran who, it appeared, was his daughter—and from the worldly woman who was not his wife—and he must be saved at once, or the happiness of their lives would suffer shipwreck.

They gained the street before the court-house which by courtesy passed under the name of "the city square". Grace's hand grew tense on Gregory's arm—"Look!"

Her whisper was lost in the wind, but Gregory, following her frightened glance, saw Robert Clinton elbowing his way through the crowd, forcing his progress bluntly, or jovially, according to the nature of obstruction. He did not see them and, by dodging, they escaped.

The nearness of danger had paled Grace's cheeks. Gregory accepted his own trembling as natural, but Grace's evident fear acted upon his nebulous state of mind in a way to condense jumbled emotions and deceptive longings into something like real thought. If they were in the right, why did they feel such expansive relief when the crowd swept them from the sidewalk to bear them far away from Robert

Clinton?

The merry-go-round, its very music traveling in a circle, clashed its steam-whistlings and organ-wailings against a drum-and-trombone band, while these distinct strata of sound were cut across by an outcropping of graphophones and megaphones. Upon an open-air platform, a minstrel troupe, by dint of falsetto inarticulateness, futile banjoes, and convulsive dancing, demonstrated how little of art one might obtain for a dime. Always out of sympathy with such displays, but now more than ever repelled by them, Grace and Gregory hurried away to find themselves penned in a court, surrounded on all sides by strident cries of "barkers", cracking reports from target-practice, fusillades at the "doll-babies", clanging jars from strength-testers and the like; while from this horrid field of misguided energy, there was no outlet save the narrow entrance they had unwittingly used.

"Horrible!" exclaimed Grace, half-stumbling over the tent-ropes that entangled the ground. "We must get out of this."

It was not easy to turn about, so dense was the crowd.

Scarcely had they accomplished the manoeuver when Grace exclaimed below her breath, "There he is!"

Sure enough, Robert Clinton stood at the narrowest point of their way. He was clinging to an upright, and while thus lifted above the heads of the multitude, sought to scan every face.

"I don't think he has seen us," muttered Hamilton Gregory, instinctively lowering his head.

"We can't get out, now," Grace lamented. "No, he hasn't seen us—yet. But that's the only place of—of escape—and he keeps looking so curiously—he must have been to the store. He knows I'm away. He may have gone to the house."

It was because every side-show of the carnival company had insisted on occupying space around the court-house, and because this space was meager, that the country folk and excursionists and townsmen showed in such compressed numbers at every turn. In reality, however, they were by no means countless; and if Robert's eagle glance continued to travel from face to face, with that maddening thoroughness—

"We'd better separate," Gregory hoarsely whispered. "We'll meet at the station."

"No. If he sees us, what would be the use? Anyway, he'll have to know to-morrow…everybody will know—to-*morrow*! No," said Grace, overcoming a slight indecision, "the important thing is not to be stopped, whoever sees. Come this way."

"But there's no chance out, that way," Gregory returned, with the obstinacy of the weak. "And if he does see us, it won't do to be seeming to try to hide."

"But we *are* hiding," Grace said definitely.

"Possibly we can keep moving about, and he will go away."

"Why should we hide, anyhow?" demanded Gregory, with sudden show of spirit.

To that, she made no reply. If he didn't know, what was the use to tell him?

Gregory moved on, but glanced back over his shoulder. "Now, he's getting down," he said in agitation. "He's making his way right toward us….All right, let him come!"

"In here—quick!" cried Grace, dragging him to one side. "Quick!"

A voice stopped them with, "Your tickets, please."

"Oh, no," wailed Gregory, "*not* into a show, Grace. We can't go into a *show*. It's—it's impossible."

She spoke rapidly: "We must. We'll be safe in there, because no one would ever suppose we'd go into such a place."

"But Grace," said Gregory firmly, "I can not—I will not go into a show."

The voice addressed them again: "It's first-class in every particular, lady. There is nothing here to bring the blush of shame to the cheek of the most fastidious. See those fierce man-eating lions that have been captured in the remotest jungles of Africa—"

Gregory looked back.

Robert Clinton was drawing nearer. As yet he had not discovered them but his eyes, grown fiercer and more impatient, were never at rest.

With a groan, Gregory thrust some money into the showman's hand, and he and Grace mingled with the noisy sight-seers flocking under the black tent.

CHAPTER XXII

THE STREET FAIR

Littleburg was trembling under the fearful din of a carnival too big for it, when Abbott Ashton, after his weeks of absence returned to find himself at Hamilton Gregory's door. He discovered old Mrs. Jefferson in the front room—this July night—because old age is on no friendly terms with falling dew; but every window was open.

"Come in," she cried, delighted at sight of his handsome smiling face —he had been smiling most of the time during his drive from Simmtown with Robert Clinton. "Here I sit by the window, where sometimes I imagine I hear a faint far-away sound. I judge it's from some carnival band. Take this chair and listen attentively; your ears are younger— now!"

Abbott did not get all of this because of the Gargantuan roar that swept through the window, but he gravely tilted his head, then took the proffered ear-trumpet: "You are right," he said, "I hear something."

"It's the street fair," she announced triumphantly. "But sometimes it's louder. How fine you look, Abbott—just as if your conscience doesn't hurt you for disappearing without leaving a clue to the mystery. You needn't be looking around, sir,—Fran isn't here."

"I wonder where she is?" Abbott smiled, "I'm dreadfully impatient to tell her the good news. Mrs. Jefferson, I'm to teach in a college— it's a much bigger thing than the position I lost here. And I have a chance to work out some ideas that I know Fran will like. I used to think that everything ought to be left precisely as it is, because it's been that way so long—I mean the church; and schools; and—and society. But I've made up my mind that nothing is right, unless it works right."

Mrs. Jefferson listened in desperate eagerness. "A watch?" she hazarded.

"Exactly," he responded hastily. "If a watch doesn't run, what's the use of its being pretty? And if churches develop a gift of tongue instead of character, what's the value of their prayers and songs? And I've concluded that if schools don't teach us how to live, they have the wrong kind of springs and wheels. Where is Fran, Mrs. Jefferson?"

"Still," she temporized, "we can't get along without watches, Abbott."

"No, nor schools, nor churches. But they must have good works. Is Fran down at the fair, do you think?"

The other bent toward him stealthily. "Ask where Mrs. Gregory is," she said, wonderfully significant.

"Well?"

"Abbott, listen: she's gone a-visiting!"

"Visiting!" Abbott was surprised.

"Yes, visiting, she that hasn't been off this place to visit a soul for ages. I tell you, boy, times have changed, here. Maybe you think nobody'd be left at home to visit; but Fran has found that there is a woman in town that she used to know, and the woman has a mighty sick child, and Lucy has gone to sit by it, so the mother can rest. Think of that, Abbott, think of Lucy going *anywhere*. My! Have you heard that we've lost a secretary at this place? I mean the future Mrs. Bob. Yes, she's gone. I'd as soon have

thought of the court-house being picked up and set in the parlor."

Mrs. Jefferson drew back and said succinctly, "Fran did it!"

Her cap quivered as she leaned forward again. "Get her to tell you all about it. We darsen't speak about it much because of the neighbors. We conspired, Fran and I. Yes, she's down at the carnival, you boy!"

Abbott hastily departed. Later he found himself in a cloud-burst of confetti, on the "city square" and when he had cleared his eyes of the red and white snow, he saw Fran disappearing like a bit of crimson glass at the bottom of a human kaleidoscope. Fran had thrown the confetti, then fled—how much brighter she was than all the other shifting units of humanity.

He fought his way toward her determinedly, finding she was about to be submerged. Was she actually trying to elude him?

"Fran!" he cried reproachfully as he reached her side. "How have you the heart to run away from me after I've been lost for weeks? Nobody knew I'd ever be found."

Fran gave up flight, and stopped to look at him. A smile slipped from the corner of one eye, to get caught at the corner of her demure mouth. "When you disappeared, you left me yourself. A friend always does. I've had you all the time."

Abbott glowed. "Still, it isn't exactly the same as if I had been able to touch your hand. Suppose we shake hands, little friend; what do you say?"

"I don't say anything," Fran retorted; "I just shake."

Her handclasp was so hearty that he was slightly disconcerted. Was her friendship so great that it left no room in her heart for something greater? Fran's emotions must not be compressed under a friendship- monopoly, but just now he hardly saw his way toward fighting such a trust.

"I want to talk to you, Fran, talk and talk, oh, just about all the long night through! Come, let me take you back home—"

"Home? Me? Ridiculous! But I'll tell you the best place that ever was, for the kind of talking you and I want to do to each other. Abbott, it won't matter to you—will it?—at what place I say to meet me, at about half-past nine?"

"Why, Fran! It's not eight o'clock," Abbott remonstrated, glancing toward the court-house clock to find it stopped, and then consulting his watch. "Do you think I am going to wait till—"

"Till half-past nine," said Fran, nonchalantly. "Very well, then."

"But what will we do in the meantime, if we're not to talk till—"

"*We?*" she mocked him. "Listen, Abbott, don't look so cross. I've a friend in town with a sick daughter, and she's a real friend so I must go to help her, a while."

He was both mystified and disappointed. "I didn't know you had any such friends in Littleburg," he remonstrated, remembering how unkind tongues had set the village against her.

Fran threw back her head, and her gesture was full of pride and confidence. "Oh!" she cried, "the town is full of my friends."

He could only stare at her in dumb amazement.

"All right, then," she said with the greatest cheerfulness, "at half- past nine. You understand the date—nine-thirty. Of course you wouldn't have me desert a friend in trouble. Where shall we meet, Abbott—at nine-thirty? Shall we say, at the Snake-Eater's?"

"No. We shall not say at the Snake-Eater's. Fran, I want you right now. I know nothing of this sick friend, but I need you more than anybody else in the world could possibly need you."

Fran said nothing, but her eyes looked at him unfaltering. She flashed up out of the black continuity of the throng like a ray of light glancing along the surface of the sea. It needed no sun in the sky to make Fran-beams.

"Go, Fran," he exclaimed, "I'll wait for you as long as I must, even if it's the eternity of nine-thirty; and I'd go anywhere in the world to meet you, even to the den of the Snake-Eater."

"That's the way for a friend to talk!" she declared, suddenly radiant —a full Fran-sun, now, instead of the slender penetrating Fran-beam.

Seeing a leg-lined lane opening before her, she darted forward.

Abbott called—"But I can't promise to talk to you as a friend, when we meet—I mean, *just* as a friend."

Fran looked back at him, still dazzling. "I only ask you to treat me as well," she said with assumed humility, "as we are told we ought to treat our—enemies."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CONQUEROR

After the extinguishment of the Fran-beam, Abbott wanted to be alone, to meditate on stellar and solar brightness, but in this vociferous wilderness, reflection was impossible. One could not even escape recognition, one could not even detach oneself from a Simon Jefferson.

"Got back to town again, hey?" said Simon. That was enough about Abbott; Simon passed at once to a more interesting theme: "Taken in the Lion Show, yet?"

"I'm just waiting for nine-thirty….I have an engagement." Futile words, indeed, since it was now only about eight o'clock.

"You come with me, then, I know all the ropes. Hey? Oh, yes, I know mother thinks me in bed—for goodness' sake don't tell on me, she'd be scared to death. But actually, old man, this carnival is good for my heart. 'Tisn't like going to church, one bit. Preaching makes me feel oppressed, and that's what scares me—feeling oppressed." He rubbed his grizzled hair nervously. "Just for fear somebody'd go tell, I've had to sneak into all these shows like I'd been a thief in the night."

Simon urged Abbott along in the direction taken, but a few minutes before, by Hamilton Gregory and Grace Noir. "You see," Simon panted, "when the girl fell off the trapeze—heard about that, hey? Mother was overjoyed, thinking I'd missed the sickening sight. But bless your soul!—I was right at the front, hanging on to the railing, and I saw it all. Why, she pretty near fell on me. Her foot slipped just so—" Simon extended his leg with some agility.

"Was she killed?" Abbott asked, concealing his astonishment over Simon's evident acquaintance with the black tent before which they had paused.

"Well," Simon reluctantly conceded, "n-n-no, she wasn't to say killed —but dreadfully bruised up, Abbott, very painful. I saw it all; this carnival has put new life into me—here! Get your ticket in a jiffy, or all the seats'll be taken. You can't stand there like that—give me your quarter, I know how to jump in and get first place. That ticket- agent knows me; I've been in five times."

From a high platform before the black tent, a voice came through a megaphone: "The Big Show. The BIG Show. See those enormous lions riding in baby carriages while La Gonizetti makes other lions dance the fandango to her violin. See those—"

"Here, Abbott, follow!" called the breathless Simon Jefferson. "Of course we'll see what's there—no use listening to *him,* like an introduction in a novel of Scott's, telling it all first. Oh, you've got to *squeeze* your way in," he continued, clenching his teeth and hurling himself forward, "just mash 'em endwise if they stand gawking in your way. You follow me."

Abbott laughed aloud at Simon's ability as they pushed their way under the tent.

"Uh-huh, now see that!" groaned Simon reproachfully, as he looked about. "Every seat taken. I tell you, you've got to lift up your feet to get into this show. Well, hang on to the rope—don't let anybody gouge you out of standing-room."

At least two-thirds of the space under the tent was taken up by tiers of seats formed of thin, and apparently fragile, blue planks, springy to the foot and deafening to the ear. From hardened ground to fringed tent-ceiling, these overlapping rows of narrow boards were brimming with men, women and children who, tenacious of their holdings, seemed each to contain in his pockets the feet of him who sat immediately behind. At any rate, no feet were visible; all was one dense mass of faces, shoulders, women's hats, and babies held up for air.

The seats faced an immense cage which rose almost to the roof. As yet, it was empty, but smaller adjoining cages promised an animated arena when the signal should be given.

Gregory and Grace Noir had sought refuge on the highest seat, where they might overlook the crowd; here, with heads bent forward as if to avoid the canvas, they hoped to escape observation. Thanks to the influx of country folk, Littleburg citizens were rarely to be seen at such shows until a later and more fashionable hour. Gregory was relieved to find his topmost plank filled with strangers.

"All goes well," he said, pressing Grace's hand. "Nobody will find out that we have been in here."

"Watch for Mr. Clinton," Grace counseled cautiously. "If he comes in, stoop lower."

"They're all strangers, Grace. Providence is with us—there's Simon Jefferson!" He was too amazed to think of concealment.

"Hush! Yes—and Abbott Ashton."

Gregory pulled his hat over his eyes.

Into the tent streamed a fresh body of sightseers. Simon, swinging to the rope that was stretched in front of the big cage, grumbled at being elbowed by weary mothers and broad-chested farmers. He told Abbott, "The lions are the only ones that have plenty of room. I wish there was a cage for me. But it's worth being jammed to see La Gonizetti—she's pretty as they're made and she's pretty all over, and she don't care who knows it. Now the first half is about to begin, but it's just bears and clowns; don't get fooled, though, La Gonizetti will come later, O. K."

The band entered and squatted upon blue boxes in one corner. Showy red coats were removed in deference to sweltering heat, and melody presided in undress. Three bears, two clowns and a bicycle sharpened interest in what was to come, whetting the mind upon jokes blunter than the intelligence of the audience. Even the band ceased playing though that had not seemed possible; its depressing andantinos had not only subdued the bears, rendering them as harmless as kittens, but had mournfully depressed the audience.

Into this atmosphere of tamed inertness, suddenly flashed a little figure whose quivering vitality communicated electric thrills. Even the clowns moved less like treadmill horses, as they took their stations at the smaller cages, waiting to lift the gates that would admit the restless lions into the central cage.

The form that had appeared—one knew not whence—was that of a slight woman, dressed in a short silk skirt of blue, and bodice of white satin. The trimmings which ran in all directions, were rich in pendents of gold and rubies. Above all, there was the alluring mystery of a crimson mask which effectually hid the woman's face.

Simon whispered into Abbott's always unready ear, "That isn't La Gonizetti. Wonder what this means? La Gonizetti is much more of a woman than this one, and she doesn't wear a mask, or much of anything else. La Gonizetti doesn't care who sees *her*. Why, this is nothing but a mere—I tell you now, if she ain't on to her job, I mean to have *my* money back." Simon glowered.

Abbott stared in great perplexity. "Then who is she?" he exclaimed. "Simon—doesn't she remind you of—of some one we know?"

"Naw. She's got on La Gonizetti's dress, and her voice has the show- girl's clangy-tin-panny-whangdoodle, but that's all *I* recognize."

Abbott wondered that Simon failed to notice the similarity between the show-girl's movements and those of Fran. This woman had Fran's form. To be sure the voice was entirely different, but the rapidity and decisiveness of action, and the air of authority, were Fran's very own. However, the show-girl's hands were as dark as an Italian's, while Fran's were—well, not so dark, at any rate,

Abbott's brow did not relax. He stood motionless, staring at everything before him with painful intentness.

Up near the roof, Gregory and Grace scarcely observed the entrance of the lion-tamer. Secured from espial, absorbed in each other, they were able, thanks to the surrounding clamor of voices, to discuss their future plans with some degree of confidence.

Simon told Abbott—"Anyway, no amateur would rub up against those beasts, so I guess it's all right. They ain't but two lions; bill says ten; man that wrote the bill was the other eight, I reckon." The show-girl was fastened in the central cage. The clowns raised the inner doors, and the lions shot from their cramped quarters swift as tawny arrows. They were almost against the slight figure, without seeming to observe her. For the fourth time since noon they stood erect, sniffing the air, their bodies unconfined by galling timbers and chilling iron. For the fourth time this day, they were to be put through their tricks by force of fear. They hated these tricks, as they hated the small cages in which they could not lash their tails. They hated the "baby carriage" in which one was presently to sit, while the other pushed him over the floor, his sullen majesty sport for the rabble. They hated the board upon which they must see-saw, while the woman stood in the middle, preserving equilibrium.

But greater than the lion's hatred, was their fear of the woman; and greater than their fear of her was their terror of that long serpent which, no matter how far it might dart through space, remained always in the woman's hand. They well knew its venomous bite, and as they slunk from side to side, their eyes were upon its coiling black tongue.

"I met Fran on the street," murmured Abbott, as he watched, unblinkingly." She said she was going to visit a sick friend. When did you see Fran last, Simon?"

"Don't know," Simon said, discouragingly. "Now they're going to see- saw. The black-maned one is the hardest to manage. I reckon, one day, he'll just naturally jump afoul of her, and tear her to pieces. Look at him! I don't believe this girl is going to make him get up on top of that board. My! how he is showing his teeth at her. Say! This is a pretty good show, hey? Glad you came, uh? Say! *Look* at his teeth!"

In truth, the black-maned lion opened his mouth to a frightful extent, making, however, not the slightest sound. He refused to budge.

Abbott shuddered.

"Samson!" cried the woman, impellingly. The other lion was patiently standing on his end of the board, waiting. He seemed fast asleep. Samson, however, was wide awake and every cruel tooth was exposed as he stretched his mouth. In his amber eyes was the glow of molten copper.

Suddenly Samson wheeled about, and made a rush for his end of the see- saw. He stepped upon it. He was conquered. His haste to obey, evidently the result of fear and hatred, produced a ripple of laughter. The other lion, feeling the sudden tremor of Samson's weight, opened his eyes suddenly and twitched his tail. He was not asleep, after all.

Simon whispered hoarsely, "It's interesting all the way through. A fellow never knows what's going to happen. 'Tain't as if you was watching clowns, knowing what the joke's to be before they say it. To my mind, lions are more like men than clowns are."

Abbott found himself intensely nervous. He longed to have it all over, anxious, above all, to prove his fears groundless. Yet how were so many coincidences to be explained away? Fran had been a show-girl, a trainer of lions, and Abbott distinctly remembered that she had spoken of a "Samson". Fran had just these movements and this height. He missed Fran's mellow voice, but voices may be disguised; and the hands now raised toward the audience may have been stained dark. Who was that "sick friend" that Fran had possibly mentioned only as an excuse for escaping? Was that a subterfuge? And why this red mask which, according to Simon Jefferson, was an innovation?

At every trick, the black-maned lion balked. He seemed resolved not to leap upon the wall-bracket; and, after attaining that precarious elevation, he pretended not to understand that he must descend. His insubordination disquieted the enormous animal acting the corresponding part. Even he began to pace softly to and fro at such times as he should have remained motionless.

When the time came for the clown to hand the woman her violin he was afraid, and withdrew his arm with marvelous rapidity. His grotesque disguise could not hide his genuine uneasiness. The members of the band, too, played their notes with unusual care, lest the slightest deviation from routine work bring catastrophe. Nothing had gone right but the see-sawing act; but of all this, the crowd was ignorant.

After the violin playing—"Now," Simon Jefferson announced, gleefully, "there's only one more act, but it's a corker, let me tell you—that's why she's resting a minute. La Gonizetti gets astride of Samson—the one that's mad—and grabs his mane, and pretends to ride like a cow- boy. Calls herself a Rough-

Rider. Makes Samson get on top of that table, then she gets on top of *him*."

"But this isn't La Gonizetti," Abbott protested, shuddering again.

"Now you've said something. That's right. But it looks like she's game—she'll try it—we'd better stand a little farther back."

A hand was laid upon Abbott's arm. "Abbott," said the voice of Robert Clinton, harsh from smothered excitement, "You went to Gregory's house—did you see him?"

Abbott did not hear. The refractory lion, knowing that his time had come to be ridden, was asserting his independence. He would not leap upon the table. The other lion stood watching sleepily to see if he would obey.

"That you, Clinton?" Simon's greeting was tense with enjoyment. "Got here for the best of it, didn't you! Seems to me I saw Gregory somewhere not long ago, but I wasn't thinking about him."

"Hercules!" the masked woman addressed the gentler of the lions. "Go to your place. Hercules—go to your place!"

Hercules turned to his blue box, and seated himself upon it, leaving his tail to take care of itself.

"Say, Simon," muttered Robert Clinton, "you didn't see Miss Grace
Noir, did you?"

"Shut up!" said Simon desperately.

The show-girl was fiercely addressing the black-maned lion. "Now! Now!
To the table! To the table!"

Samson did not budge. Facing the woman of the mask, he opened his mouth, revealing the red cave of his throat—past the ivory sentinels that not only stood guard, but threatened, one could look down and down. This was no yawn of weariness, but a sign of rebellion—a sort of noiseless roar.

The trainer retreated to the farther side of the cage, then made a forward rush, waving her whip, and shouting dangerously, "Up, Samson, up Samson, UP!" She did not pause in her course till close to his face.

Again he opened his mouth, baring every tooth, voiceless, but unconquered.

Hercules, finding that affairs had come to a halt, slowly descended from his box, keeping his half-opened eyes upon the woman. Restlessly he began to pace before the outer door.

The slight figure withdrew several steps, then smote the rebellious lion a sharp blow across the mouth. He snapped viciously at the lash. It slipped away from between his teeth. Having rescued her whip, she shouted to the other lion, "Back to your place, Hercules. Hercules— back to your place!"

She stood pointing sternly toward the box, but Hercules stretched himself across the place of exit and lay watching her covertly.

The faces of the band boys had become of a yellowish paleness. They continued to pound and blow, but the music was not the same; a terrible foreboding brought a sense of faintness even to the boldest.

From behind the mask came the voice so loud that it sounded as a scream—"Up, Samson, up, Samson —UP!"

Then it was that Samson found his voice. A mighty roar shook the loosely-set bars of the central cage —they vibrated visibly. The roar did not come as one short sharp note of defiance; it rose and fell, then rose anew, varying in the inflections of the voice of a slave who dares to threaten, fears even while he threatens, and gathers passion from his fear.

At that fearful reverberation, the audience started up, panic- stricken. Hitherto, the last act had been regarded as a badly-played comedy; now tragedy was in the air.

Gregory and Grace Noir at that instant, became alive to their surroundings. Hitherto, despising the show, rebellious at the destiny which had forced them to attend it, they had been wholly absorbed in their efforts to escape observation. The roaring of the lion startled them to a perception of the general alarm.

Grace clung to Gregory. "Oh, save me!" she panted hysterically.

The voice of the woman behind the bars rang throughout the tent—"Sit down!" The voice was not loud, now, but singularly penetrating.

"Sit down, all of you, and remain absolutely motionless, or I am lost."

She dared not remove her gaze from Samson's eyes; but on hearing no rattling of planks, she knew her appeal had been obeyed. There came to her, however, the smothered cries of terrified women, mingled, here and there, with unrestrained ejaculations of dismay.

Abbott Ashton, but a few yards distant, grasped the rope with bloodless hands; he appeared as a white statue, seeming not even to breathe. In that moment, Robert Clinton forgot the jealous suspicion that had tortured his heart since missing Grace Noir from her desk.

Grace Noir, her eyes closed, her cheeks pallid, leaned her head upon
Gregory's shoulder, quivering convulsively.

"There, there," Gregory whispered in her ear, soothingly, "everything will be all right."

The masked woman for the second time addressed the terrified audience, still not venturing to turn her head in their direction: "Whoever moves, or speaks, or cries aloud, will be my murderer. I have only one hope left, and I'm going to try it now. I ask you people out there to give me just this one chance for my life. Keep absolutely still."

Again Samson uttered his terrible roar. It alone was audible. Tier above tier, faces rose to the tent-roof, white and set. The audience was like one huge block of stone in which only faces have been carved.

The penetrating voice addressed the band boys: "Don't play. He can tell you're frightened."

The agitated music ceased.

Then the woman walked to the farthest side of the inclosure. In doing so she was obliged to pass the crouching form of Hercules, but she pretended not to know he was there; she moved slowly backward, always facing Samson.

At last the vertical bars prevented farther retreat Then she lifted her hand slowly, steadily, and drew off her crimson mask. It dropped at her feet Despite the muffled street-noises that never ceased to rumble from afar, the whispering sound of the silken mask, as it struck the plank floor of the cage, was distinctly audible.

"Grace!" Gregory whispered in horror,—"it's Fran!"

Grace started from his embrace at the name and glared down upon the stage. She sat erect, unsupported, petrified.

Gregory's brow was moistened with a chilled dew. "It's Fran," he mumbled, "it's Fran! Grace—pray for her!"

Fran looked Samson steadily in the eyes, and Samson glared back fixedly. For a few moments, this quiver between life and death remained at the breaking-point. Had a stranger at that moment looked under the tent-entrance, he might have thought everybody asleep. There was neither sound nor movement.

Grace whispered—"It is the hand of God!"

Her tone was almost inaudible, but Gregory shrank as from a mortal blow; its sinister meaning was unmistakable. Swiftly he turned to stare at her.

In Grace's eyes was a wild and ominous glare akin to that of the threatening lion. It was a savage conviction that Fran was at last confronted by the justice of Heaven.

Suddenly Fran crouched forward till her head was almost on a level with her waist, in so much that it was a physical exertion to hold her face uplifted. In this sinuous position she was the embodiment ofpower. If she felt misgivings concerning this last resource, there was no look to betray it. Straight toward Samson she rushed, her body lithe and serpentine, her direction unerring.

To the beast, Fran had become one of those mysterious flying serpents which bite from afar. He felt the sting of her terrible eyes and his gaze grew shifty. It wandered away, and, on returning, found her teeth bared, as if feeling for his heart.

Rushing up to his very face—*"Samson!"* she cried, impellingly.

Again he seemed to feel the lash upon his tawny skin.

"Samson. Up, Samson, up, Samson—UP!"

Suddenly Samson wheeled about, and leaped upon the table.

Fran stamped her foot at the other lion. "Go to your place, Hercules!" she cried, with something like contempt.

Hercules slowly rose, stretched himself, then marched to his box. He looked from Fran to the immovable Samson waiting upon the table, then mounted to his place, and seemed to fall asleep.

And now, at last, Fran looked at the spectators. Stepping lightly to the bars, she threw kisses this way and that, smiling radiantly. "Oh!" she cried, with vibrating earnestness, "you people out there—you can't think how I love you! You've saved my life. You are perfect heroes. Now make all the noise you please."

"May we move?" called a cautious voice from a few feet away. It was
Abbott Ashton, with eyes like stars.

Fran looked at him, wondering at his thoughts. She answered by an upward movement of her hand.

As though by a carefully rehearsed arrangement, the audience rose to its feet, band boys and all. Such a shout! Such waving of hats and handkerchiefs! Such unabashed sobs! Such inarticulateness—such graspings of neighboring hands! The spectators had gone mad with joyful relief.

Fran leaped upon the table, and mounted Samson.

"Now, I'm a Rough-Rider!" she shouted, burying her hands in the mane, and lying along the lion's back in true cow-boy fashion. She plunged, she shouted loudly, but Samson only closed his eyes and seemed to sleep.

After that, making the lions return to their cramped side-cages was a mere detail. The show was ended.

Fran, remaining in the empty cage, stood at the front, projecting her hand through the bars to receive the greetings of the crowd. Almost every one wanted to shake hands with her. They couldn't tell of their surprise over her identity, of their admiration for her courage, of their joy at her safety. They could do nothing but look into her eyes, press her hand, then go into a humdrum world in which are no lions— and not many Frans.

"Look, look!" Simon Jefferson suddenly grasped Robert Clinton's hand, and pointed toward the tent-roof. "There they are!"

Something very strange had happened up there, but it was lost to Clinton's keen jealous gaze—one of those happenings in the soul, which, however momentous, passes unobserved in the midst of the throng.

"Not so fast!" Grace cautioned Gregory. "We must wait up here till the very last—don't you see Mr. Clinton? And Simon Jefferson is now pointing us out. We can't go down that way—"

"*We!*" Gregory harshly echoed. "We! I have nothing to do with you, Grace Noir. Go to him, if you will."

Grace turned ashen pale. "What do you mean?" she stammered. "You tell me to go to Mr. Clinton?"

"I tell you to go where you please. That girl yonder is my daughter, do you understand? Don't hold me back! I shall go to her and proclaim her as my child to the world. Do you hear me? That's *my* Fran!"

Grace shrank back in the suspicion that Hamilton Gregory had gone mad like the rest of the crowd. "Do you mean that you never want to see me again? Do you mean that you want me to marry Mr. Clinton?"

"I do not care what you do," he said, still more roughly.

"You do not *care?*" she stammered, bewildered. "What has happened?
You do not care—for me?"

She looked deep into his eyes, but found no incense burning there. The shrine was cold.

"Mr. Gregory! And after all that has passed between us? After I have given you my—myself—"

Gregory seized her arm, as if to hold her off. His eyes were burning dangerously: "I saw murder in your heart while you were watching Fran," he whispered fiercely. "That's my daughter, do you understand? I know you now, I know you now…." He stumbled down the steps, pushing out of his way those who opposed his progress.

Grace stared after him with bloodless cheeks and smoldering eyes. Clearly, she decided, the sight of Fran's fearful danger had unbalanced his mind. But how could he care so much about that Fran? And how could he leave her, knowing that Robert Clinton was beginning to climb upward with eyes fastened upon her face?

But it was not the sight of Fran's danger that had for ever alienated Gregory from Grace Noir. In an instant, she had stood revealed to him as an unlovely monster. His sensitive nature, always abnormally alive to outward impressions, had thrilled responsively to the exultation of the audience. He had endured the agony of suspense, he had shared the universal enthusiasm. If, in a sense, he was a series of moods, each the result of blind impulse, it so happened that Grace's hiss—"It's the hand of God," turned his love to aversion; she was appealing as a justification of personal hatred, to the God they were both betraying.

Grace began to tremble as she watched Robert Clinton coming up, and Hamilton Gregory descending. She had trusted foolishly to a broken reed, but it was not too late to preserve the good name she had been about to besmirch. The furnace-heat in which rash resolves are forged, was cooled. Gregory had deserted Fran's mother; he was false to Mrs. Gregory; he would perhaps have betrayed Grace in the end; but Clinton was at hand, and his adoration would endure.

In the meantime, the voice of Fran was to be heard above that of the happy crowd: "I love you all. You helped me do it. I should certainly have been mangled but for you perfect heroes. Yes, thank you…. Yes, I feel fine….And, oh, men and women, I could just *feel* your spirits holding mine up till I was so high—I was in the clouds. That's what subdued Samson. He knew I wasn't afraid. He *knew* it! And I wanted to win out for your sakes as well as my own—yes I did! Thank you men….Thank you, women….Well, if here aren't the children; too—bless your brave hearts!…And is that your baby? My goodness, and what a baby it is!…No, I'm not a bit tired—"

She stopped suddenly, on feeling a crushing grip. She looked down, a frown forming on her brow, but the sun shone clear when she saw Abbott Ashton. She gave him a swift look, as if to penetrate his inmost thoughts.

He met her eyes unfalteringly. "It's already nine o'clock," he said with singular composure. "Don't forget nine-thirty."

Then he disappeared in the crowd.

Fran saw the ranks thinning before her. She was glad, for suddenly she found herself very tired. What would Abbott think? Would he, henceforth, see nothing but the show-girl of tinsel and trainer's whip, for ever showing through the clear glass of her real self? At nine-thirty, what would Abbott say to her? and how should she reply? The thought of him obscured her vision of admiring faces. Her manner lost its spontaneity.

Then, to her amazement, she beheld Hamilton Gregory stumbling toward her, looking neither to right nor left, seeing none but her—Hamilton Gregory at a show! Hamilton Gregory *here*, of all places, his eyes wide, his head thrown back as if to bare his face to her startled gaze.

"Fran!" cried Gregory, thrusting forth his arms to take her hands. "Fran! Even now, the bars divide us. But oh, I am so glad, so glad— and God answered my prayer and saved you, Fran—*my daughter!"*

CHAPTER XXIV

NEAR THE SKY

It was half-past nine when Abbott met Fran, according to appointment, before the Snake Den. From her hands she had removed the color of Italy, and from her body, the glittering raiment of La Gonizetti.

Fran came up to the young man from out the crowded street, all quivering excitement. In contrast with the pulsing life that ceaselessly changed her face, as from reflections of dancing light- points, his composure showed almost grotesque.

"Here I am," she panted, shooting a quizzical glance at his face, "are you ready for me? Come on, then, and I'll show you the very place for *us*."

Abbott inquired serenely, "Down there in the Den?"

Fran scrutinized him anew, always wondering how he had taken the lions. What she saw did not alarm her.

"No," she returned, "not in the Den. You're no Daniel, if I *am* a
Charmer. No dens for us."

"Nor lion-cages?" inquired Abbott, still inscrutable; "never again?"

"Never again," came her response; it was a promise.

As they made their way through the noisy "city square" she kept on wondering. Since his face revealed nothing, his disapproval, at any rate, was not so great as to be beyond control. Did that signify that he did not feel enough for her really to care? Better for him to be angry about the show, than not to care.

Fran stopped before the Ferris Wheel.

"Let's take a ride," she said, a little tremulously. "Won't need tickets. Bill, stop the wheel; I want to go right up. This is a friendof mine—Mr. Ashton. And Abbott, this is an older friend than you—Mr. Bill Smookins."

Mr. Bill Smookins was an exceedingly hard-featured man, of no recognizable age. Externally, he was blue overalls and greasy tar.

Abbott grasped Bill's hand, and inquired about business.

"Awful pore, sense Fran lef' the show," was the answer, accompanied by a grin that threatened to cut the weather-beaten face wide open.

Fran beamed. "Mr. Smookins knew my mother—didn't you, Bill? He was awful good to me when I was a kid. Mr. Smookins was a Human Nymph in those days, and he smoked and talked, he did, right down under the water—remember, Bill? That was sure-enough water—oh, he's a sure- enough Bill, let me tell you!"

Bill intimated, as he slowed down the engine, that the rheumatism he had acquired under the water, was sure-enough rheumatism—hence his change of occupation. "I was strong enough to be a Human Nymph," he explained, "but not endurable. Nobody can't last many years as a Human Nymph."

Abbott indicated his companion—"Here's one that'll last my time."

The wheel stopped. He and Fran were barred into a seat.

"And now," Fran exclaimed, "it's all ups and downs, just like a moving-picture of life. Why don't you say something, Mr. Ashton? But no, you can keep still—I'm excited to death, and wouldn't hear you anyway. I want to do all the talking—I always do, after I've been in the cage. My brain is filled with air —so this is the time to be soaring up into the sky, isn't it! What is your brained filled with?— but never mind. We'll be just two balloons—my! aren't you glad we haven't any strings on us—suppose some people had hold!—I, for one, would be willing never to go down again. Where are the clouds?—Wish we could meet a few. Down there on the solid earth—oh, down *there* the first things you meet are reasons for things, and people's opinions of how things look, and reports of what folks say. And up here, there's nothing but the moon—isn't it bright! See how I'm trembling—always do, after the lions. Now, Abbott, I'll leave a small opening for just one word—"

"I'll steady you," said Abbott, briefly, and he took her hand. She did not appear conscious of his protecting clasp.

"I never see the moon so big," she went on, breathlessly, "without thinking of that night when it rolled along the pasture as if it wanted to knock us off the foot-bridge for being where we oughtn't. I never

could understand why you would stay on that bridge with a perfect stranger, when your duty was to be usher at the camp-meeting! You weren't ushering me, you know, you were holding my hand—I mean, I was holding your hand, as Miss Sapphira says I shouldn't. What a poor helpless man—as I'm holding you now, I presume! But I laughed in meeting. People ought to go outdoors to smile, and keep their religion in a house, I guess. I'm going to tell you why I laughed, for you've never guessed, and you've always been afraid to ask—"

"Afraid of *you*, Fran?"

"Awfully, I'm going to show you—let go, so I can show you. No, I'm in earnest—you can have me, afterwards....Remember that evangelist? There he stood, waving his hands—as I'm doing now—moving his arms with his eyes fastened upon the congregation—this way—look, Abbott."

"Fran! As if I were not already looking."

"Look—just so; not saying a word—only waving this way and that... And it made me think of our Hypnotizer—the man that waves people into our biggest tent—he seems to pick 'em up bodily and carry them in his arms. Well! And if the people are to be waved into a church, it won't take much of a breeze to blow them out. I don't believe in soul- waving. But that doesn't mean that I don't believe in the church—does it?—do you think?"

"You believe in convictions, Fran. And since you've come into the church, you don't have to say that you believe in it."

"Yes—there's nothing on the outside, and oh, sometimes there's so little, so little under the roof—what do you think of me, Abbott?"

"Fran, I think you are the most—"

"But *do* you!" she interposed, still unsteadily. "In the superlative? I don't see how you can, after that exhibition behind the bars. Anyway, I want you to talk about yourself. What made you go away from town? But that's not the worst: what made you stay away? And what were you doing off there wherever it was, while poor little girls were wondering themselves sick about you? But wait!—the wheel's going down—down—down....Good thing I have you to hold to—poor Miss Sapphira, she can't come, now! Listen at all the street-criers, getting closer, and the whistle-sounds—I wish we had whistles; the squawky kind. See my element, Abbott, the air I've breathed all my life—the carnival. Here we are, just above the clouds of confetti....Now we're riding through....pretty damp, these clouds are, don't you think! Those ribbons of electric lights have been the real world for me. Abbott—they were home....No, Bill, we don't want to get out. We intend to ride until you take this wheel to pieces. And oh, by the way, Bill—just stop this wheel, every once in a while, will you?—when we're up at the very tiptop. All right—good-by."

And Abbott called gaily, "Good-by, Mr. Smookins!"

"I'm glad you did that, Abbott. You think you're somebody, when somebody else thinks so, too. Now we're rising in the world." Fran was so excited that she could not keep her body from quivering. In spite of this, she fastened her eyes upon Abbott to ask, suddenly, "'Most'— what?"

"Most adorable," Abbott answered, as if he had been waiting for the prompting. "Most precious. Most bewitchingly sweet. Most unanswerably and eternally—*Fran!*"

"And you—" she whispered.

"And I," he told her, "am nothing but most wanting-to-be-loved."

"It's so queer," Fran said, plaintively. "You know, Abbott, how long you've fought against me. You know it, and I don't blame you, not in the least. There's nothing about me to make people....But even now, how can you think you understand me, when I don't understand myself?"

"I don't," he said, promptly. "I've given up trying to understand you.
Since then, I've just loved. That's easy."

"What will people think of a superintendent of public schools caring for a show-girl, even if she *is* Fran Nonpareil. How would it affect your career?"

"But you have promised never again to engage in a show, so you are not a show-girl."

"What about my mother who lived and died as a lion-tamer? What will you do about my life-history? I'd never speak to a man who could feel ashamed of my mother. What about my father who has never

publicly acknowledged me? I'd not want to have anything to do with a man who— who could be proud of him."

"As to the past, Fran, I have only this to say: whatever hardships it contained, whatever wrongs or wretchedness—it evolved you, *you*, the Fran of to-day—the Fran of this living hour. And it's the Fran of this living hour that I want to marry."

Fran covered her face with her hands. For a while there was silence, then she said:

"Father was there, to-night."

"At the lion-show? Impossible! Mr. Gregory go to a—a—to—a—"

"Yes, it is possible for him even to go to a show. But to do him justice, he was forced under the tent, he had no intention of doing anything so wicked as that, he only meant to do some little thing like running away—But no, I can't speak of him with bitterness, now. Abbott, he seems all changed."

Abbott murmured, as if stupefied, "Mr. Gregory at a show!"

"Yes, and a lion-show. When it was over he came to me—he was so excited—"

"So was I," spoke up the other—"rather!"

"You didn't show it. I thought maybe you wouldn't care if I *had* been eaten up....No, no, listen. He wanted to claim me—he called me 'daughter' right there before the people, but they thought it was just a sort of—of church name. But he was wonderfully moved. I left the tent with him, and we had a long talk—I came from him to you. I never saw anybody so changed."

"But why?"

"You see, he thought I was going to be killed right there before his eyes, and seeing it with his very own eyes made him feel responsible. He told me, afterwards, that when he found out who it was in the cage, he thought of mother in a different way,—he saw how his desertion had driven her to earning her living with showmen, so I could be supported. All in all, he is a changed man."

"Then will he acknowledge you?—but no, no,..."

"You see? He can't, on account of Mrs. Gregory. There's no future for him, or for her, except to go on living as man and wife—without the secretary. He imagines it would be a sort of reparation to present me to the world as his daughter, he thinks it would give him happiness— but it can't be. Grace Noir has found it all out—"

"Then she will tell!" Abbott exclaimed, in dismay.

"She would have told but for one thing. She doesn't dare, and it's on her own account—of course. She has been terribly—well, indiscreet. You can't think to what lengths she was willing to go—not from coldly making up her mind, but because she lost grip on herself, from always thinking she couldn't. So she went away with Bob Clinton—she'll marry him, and they'll go to Chicago, out of Littleburg history—poor Bob! Remember the night he was trying to get religion? I'm afraid he'll conclude that religion isn't what he thought it was, living so close to it from now on."

"All this interests me greatly, dear, because it interests you. Still, it doesn't bear upon the main question."

"Abbott, you don't know why I went to that show to act. You thought I was caring for a sick friend. What do you think of such deceptions?"

"I think I understand. Simon Jefferson told me of a girl falling from a trapeze; it was possibly La Gonizetti's daughter. Mrs. Jefferson told me that Mrs. Gregory is nursing some one. The same one, I imagine. And La Gonizetti was a friend of yours, and you took her place, so the mother could stay with the injured daughter."

"You're a wonder, yourself!" Fran declared, dropping her hands to stare at him. "Yes, that's it. All these show-people are friends of mine. When the mayor was trying to decide what carnival company they'd have for the street fair, I told him about this show, and that's why it's here. Poor La Gonizetti needs the money dreadfully—for they spend it as fast as it's paid in. The little darling will have to go to a hospital, and there's nothing laid by. The boys all threw in, but they didn't have much, themselves. Nobody has. Everybody's poor in this old world—except you and me. I've taken La Gonizetti's place in the cage all day to keep her from losing out; and if this wasn't the last day, I don't know whether I'd have promised you or not.... Samson was pretty good, but that mask annoyed him. So you see—but

honestly, Abbott, doesn't all this make you feel just a wee bit different about me?"

"It makes me want to kiss you, Fran."

"It makes you"—she gasped—"want to do—*that?* Why, Abbott! Nothing can save you."

"I'm afraid not," he agreed.

The car was swinging at the highest reach of the wheel. The engine stopped.

She opened her eyes very wide. "I'd think you'd be afraid of such a world-famous lion-trainer," she declared, drawing back." Some have been, I assure you."

"I'm not afraid," Abbott declared, drawing her toward him. He would have kissed her, but she covered her face with her hands and bent her head instinctively.

"Up!" cried Abbott. "Up, Samson, up!"

Fran laughed hilariously, and lifted her head. She looked at him through her fingers. Her face was a garden of blush-roses. She pretended to roar but the result was not terrifying; then she obediently held up her mouth.

"After all," said Fran, speaking somewhat indistinctly, "you haven't told why you ran away to leave poor Fran guessing where you'd gone. Do you know how I love you, Abbott?"

"I think I know."

"I'm glad—for I could never tell you. Real love is like real religion—you can't talk about it. Makes you want to joke, even if you can't think of anything funny to say—makes you chatter about anything else, or just keep still. Seems to be something down here—this is my heart, isn't it?—hope I have the right place, I left school so early—seems even when I refer to it I ought to—well, as I said, make a sort of joke…."

"But this is no joke," said Abbott, kissing her again.

"Yes," said Fran, happily, "we can talk about it in *that* way. Isn't
Bill Smookins a dear to keep us up here so long?"

It was a good while later that Abbott said, "As to why I left Littleburg: Bob knew of a private school that has just been incorporated as a college. A teacher's needed, one with ideas of the new education—the education that teaches us how to make books useful to life, and not life to books—the education that teaches happiness as well as words and figures; just the kind that you didn't find at my school, little rebel! Bob was an old chum of the man who owns the property so he recommended me, and I went. It's a great chance, a magnificent opening. The man was so pleased with the way I talked— he's new to the business, so that must be his excuse—that I am to be the president."

Fran's voice came rather faintly—"Hurrah! But you are to be far, far above my reach, just as I prophesied. Don't you remember what I said to you during our drive through Sure-Enough Country?"

"And that isn't all," said Abbott, looking straight before him, and pretending that he had not heard. "In that town—Tahlelah, Oklahoma—I discovered, out in the suburbs, a cottage—the dearest little thing— as dear as…as Mr. Smookins; just big enough for a girl like Fran. I rented it at once—of course, it oughtn't to be standing there idle—there's such a fragrant flower-garden—I spent some time arranging the grounds as I think you'll like them. I didn't furnish the cottage, though. Women always like to select their own carpets and things, and—"

Fran's face was a dimpled sea of pink and crimson waves, with starry lights in her black eyes for signal-lights. "Oh, you king of hearts!" she exclaimed. "And shall we have a church wedding, and just kill 'em?"

Abbott laughed boyishly. "No—you must remember that your connection with show-life is at an end."

"But—and then—and so," cried Fran rapturously, "I'm to have a home after all, with flower-gardens and carpets and things—a sure-enough home—Abbott, a home with *you!* Don't you know, it's been the dream of my life to—to—"

Abbott was inexpressibly touched. "Yes, I was just thinking of what I heard you say, once—to belong to somebody."

Fran slipped her arms about his neck. "And what a somebody! To belong to you. And to know that my

home is *our* home…."

Abbott, with a sober sense of his unworthiness, embraced her silently.

From far below came a sudden sound, making its way through the continuity of the street-uproar. It was the chugging of the engine.

The wheel began to revolve.

Down they came—down—down—

Fran looked up at the moon. "Good-by," she called, gaily. "The world is good enough for me!"

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FRAN ***

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

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

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™’s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by

the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.