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A FOOL THERE WAS

BY

PORTER EMERSON BROWNE

"A Fool there was and he made his prayer—
(Even as you and I.)
To a rag and a bone and a hank of hair—
(We called her the woman who did not care)
But the fool he called her his lady fair—
(Even as you and I.)"

ILLUSTRATED BY EDMUND MAGRATH AND W. W. FAWCETT

1909

TO ROBERT HILLIARD.

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"Beautiful, gloriously beautiful in her strange, weird dark beauty"

"Bye little sweetheart"

"I do forgive—forgive and understand"

"Can't you find in that dead thing you call a heart just one shred of pity?"

CHAPTER ONE.

OF CERTAIN PEOPLE.

To begin a story of this kind at the beginning is hard; for when the beginning may have been, no man

knows. Perhaps it was a hundred years ago—perhaps a thousand—perhaps ten thousand; and it may well be, yet longer ago, even, than that. Yet it can be told that John Schuyler came from a long line of clean-bodied, clean-souled, clear-eyed, clear-headed ancestors; and from these he had inherited cleanness of body and of soul, clearness of eye and of head. They had given him all that lay in their power to give, had these honest, impassive Dutchmen and—women—these broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped English; they had amalgamated for him their virtues, and they had eradicated for him their vices; they had cultivated for him those things of theirs that it were well to cultivate; and they had plucked ruthlessly from the gardens of heredity the weeds and tares that might have grown to check his growth. And, doing this, they had died, one after another, knowing not what they had done—knowing not why they had done it—knowing not what the result would be—doing that which they did because it was in them to do it; and for no other reason save that. For so it is of this world.

First, then, it is for you to know these things that I have told. Secondly, it is for you to realize that there are things in this world of which we know but little; that there are other things of which we may sometime learn; that there are infinitely more things that not even the wisest of us may ever begin to understand. God chooses to tell us nothing of that which comes after; and of that which comes therein He lets us learn just enough that we may know how much more there is.

And knowing and realizing these things, we may but go back as far toward the beginning as it is in our power to see.

* * * * *

Before the restless, never-ebbing of the tides of business had overwhelmed it with a seething flood of watered stocks and liquid dollars, there stood on a corner of Fifth Avenue and one of its lower tributaries, a stern, heavy-portalld mansion of brownstone. It was a house not forbidding, but dignified. Its broad, plate-glass windows gazed out in silent, impassive tolerance upon the streams of social life that passed it of pleasant afternoons in Spring and Fall—on sleet-swept nights of winter when 'bus and brougham brought from theatre and opera their little groups and pairs of fur-clad women and high-hatted men. It was a big house—big in size—big in atmosphere—big in manner.

At its left there was another big house, much like the one that I have already described. It was possibly a bit more homelike—a bit less dignified; for, possibly, its windows were a trifle more narrow, and its portal a little less imposing. And across from that there lay a smaller house—a house of brick; and this was much more inviting than either of the others; for one might step from the very sidewalk within the broad hall, hung with two very, very old portraits and lighted warmly with shades of dull yellow, and of pink.

In the first of the big houses there lived a boy; and in the second there lived another boy; and across, in the little house of brick, there lived a girl. Of course, in these houses there dwelt, as well, other people.

Of these was John Stuyvesant Schuyler, who, with his wife Gretchen, lived in the big house on the corner, was a man silent, serious. He lived intent, honest, upright. He seldom laughed; though when he did, there came at the corners of mouth and eye, tiny, tell-tale lines which showed that beneath seriousness and silence, lay a fund of humor unharmed by continual drain. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered, straight-backed. And to that which had been left him, he added, in health, in mind, and in money, and he added wisely and well, and never at unjust expense to anyone.

His wife was much as he in trait and habit. She, too, was silent, serious, intent. Of her time, of her effort, of herself, she gave freely wherein it were well to give. In her youth, she had been a beautiful girl; as a woman, she was still beautiful; and her husband and her son were very proud of her, though the one was fifty-five, and the other but twelve.

In the big house next door, there lived Thomas Cathcart Blake. He, too, had a wife, and one child—a boy. And of John Stuyvesant Schuyler he was very fond—even as Mrs. Thomas Cathcart Blake was fond of Mrs. John Stuyvesant Schuyler; and even as Tom Blake, the son of the one, was fond of Jack Schuyler, the son of the other. Blake, the elder, was a man rotund of figure, ruddy of complexion, great of heart. He laughed much; for he enjoyed much. He gave away much more than he could make; and he laughed about it. His wife laughed with him. And really it made no difference; for they had more for themselves than they could ever use. Of course, you know, it is true that many people have more than they can ever use; but few ever think so.

In the little, warm house of red brick, across the street, lived Kathryn Blair, and with her another Kathryn Blair, who was as much like the other as it is possible for six to be like thirty. They both had wide, violet eyes and sensitive, red lips, and very white teeth and lithe, slender bodies. And they were both loved very much by everyone; and everyone said what a shame it was that he or she hadn't put his

or her foot down *hard* and made Jimmy Blair stay at home instead of letting him go down into that unpronounceable Central American place and get killed in an opera bouffe revolution with which he had absolutely nothing to do except that he couldn't stand idly by and see women and little children shot. Still, it was such a blessing to Kate that she had little Kate to help her bear it all. And she had enough money, too; no one seemed to know how; for Jimmy Blair was a reckless giver and a poor business man. But John Stuyvesant Schuyler and Thomas Cathcart Blake had been executors. And that explained much to those who knew; for once every two or three months, these two men, so different and yet so alike, would stalk solemnly, side by side, across the street and, still solemnly, still side by side, would inform the violet-eyed widow of Jimmy Blair that the investments that her husband had made for her had been very fortunate and that there was in the bank for her the sum of many more hundreds of dollars than poor Jimmy himself could have made in as many years. And she, deifying the man who had been her husband, endowing him with the abilities of a Morgan, a Root and a Rothschild, would believe all that they said; and she would tell the neighbors; and they, being good neighbors, would nod, seriously, unsmilingly. "Jimmy Blair was a wonderful, wonderful man," they would say. And the violet eyes would grow soft and dim, and the sensitive lips tremble a little, and the prettily-poised head would sink forward upon the rounded breast. And she was less unhappy; for when others love the one you love, even though that one be gone, it makes the pain far, far less. Also, it is a great blessing to have about one those who know enough not to know too much.

So it was of the three houses, and of those who lived therein.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER TWO.

OF CERTAIN OTHER PEOPLE.

In the littleness of things, it so happened that at a time when John Stuyvesant Schuyler and Thomas Cathcart Blake, serious, solemn, side-by-side, were telling the widow of Jimmy Blair that the Tidewater Southern Railroad, in which her husband had largely interested himself before his death, had declared an extra dividend that had enabled them that day to deposit to her credit in the bank the sum of four thousand two hundred and eighty-one dollars and seventy-three cents, in a little hut on the black Breton coast a woman lay dying.

It was a bare hut, and noisome. In it it were perhaps better to die than to live; and yet that one might not say. From before it one might gaze upon league upon league of sullen sea, stretching to where, far in the dim distance, lay the curve of the horizon upbearing the gray dome of the sky.

Inside the hovel there was a smoke-stained fireplace beside which was strewn an armful of faggots. There was before it a number of broken and greasy dishes, filled with fragments of food. And all about on the floor lay the litter of the sick-room.

The dying woman was stretched inert, moveless, upon a rough bed of rope and rush. Perhaps she had been pretty once, in an animal way. She was not now. Lips that doubtless had been red were white and drawn in pain; and there was blood upon them, where white, even teeth had bitten in the way that those who suffer have of trying to hide a greater suffering beneath a lesser. The eyes, deep and dark, were dull and half-hidden by their blue, transparent lids. And the cheeks were sunken, and ghastly—touched by the hand of death.

A heavy, course-featured woman, thin hair streaked with gray, flat-backed, flat-breasted, sat beside the rude bed, silent, motionless, awaiting an end that she had so often watched in the sullen ferocity that is of beast rather than of man. And on her lap lay a little, pink, puling thing that whimpered and twisted weakly—a little, naked, thing half covered by roughly-cast sacking.

The tiny, twisting thing whimpered. The woman beside the bed held it, waiting. The woman on the bed moaned a little, and the glaze upon the eyes grew more thick. And that was all.

There came to the ears that were not too new come or too far gone to hear, the sound of hoof beats upon the turf. They came nearer.... They stopped. Came the sound of spurred heels striking upon the trodden dirt without the door.... There stood in the opening the figure of a man. He was tall, and well-proportioned, though if anything a bit too slender—a bit too graceful; and he was, if anything, a bit too well-groomed. He had light hair, and moustache. He had cold eyes that smiled; cold lips that smiled. He stood in the doorway, trying to accustom his eyes to the gloom within, the while playing a deft tattoo upon his booted calf with light crop that he carried in his right hand.

"Well?" he said, at length, in the French that is of Paris. "Well? ... What is all this?"

The tiny thing whimpered. The woman upon the bed moaned a little, weakly. She, who sat beside it, looked up, eyes aflame. She said no word.

The man in the doorway took a step forward, entering. He was still smiling. He looked about him; and then he continued:

"Sick, eh? ... Dying? ... And that thing that you have in your—*Ma foi!* A baby, eh?" He laughed, aloud. The broken peals came back to him from the sodden, smoke-stained rafters. "Strange that I should have come to-day.... A baby!" He laughed again, modulatedly. And then, with an air of sympathetic commiseration he said to the gray-haired old woman with the eyes of fire:

"Too bad that your daughter is not married—since she, I presume, is the mother! ... And the happy father?—he is—?" He stopped, waiting, smilingly.

The fierce, blazing eyes were set full upon his own. She said, in the patois that was of her and hers:

"You ask that? ... You?"

He answered, evenly.

"Yes. I ask that. Even I."

Quickly, with the agility of the brute, she thrust toward him the little, puling thing that lay upon her lap.

"Look, then," she said, in deep, grating tones.

He leaned forward, crossing his hands behind him, and looked. The crop, held in his right hand, tapped lightly against his booted left leg. The woman waited. At length he stood erect. He shook his head and smiled.

"Babies are all alike," he remarked, easily. "Red, dirty, unformed, no hair.... This is a little redder, a little more dirty, a little more unformed; it has a little less hair.... Beyond that, *quoi?*"

The shrunken lips of the old woman set tightly; the eyes flared.

"You dare—!" she began. And then: "It is your mouth—your chin. The nose is yours. The eyes they shall be hers." She nodded her head in the direction of the dying mother upon the bed. "And perhaps, some day—" She did not finish. She settled the baby back again upon her knees and sat, waiting.

The man, still smiling, gazed up the woman on the bed.

"Dead?" he queried, with a lift of the brows.

She did not answer. He bent over the prostrate form; then again stood erect. He shrugged his shoulders.

He turned again to the shrivelled woman on the chair.

"You have named it?" he asked. "You have named—our child?"

Still she did not answer.

"It were not improper," he continued, smilingly, half-musingly, "for a father to venture a suggestion anent a name.... *Eh bien*, then. I should wish that the baby be known as" he stopped for a moment, thinking, the while lightly tapping booted leg with the tip of his crop. "I should suggest," he repeated, "calling her Rien. It is an appropriate name, Rien. It is not a bad name; in fact, it is rather a pretty name.... Rien.... Rien.... Rien...." He repeated it several times. "Yes, it seems to me that that is an excellent name.... We will, then, consider her name Rien." He laughed once more.

"Because of certain reasons," he went on, "I'm afraid that my paternal duties must cease with the naming of our child."

He turned to the dying woman upon the bed.

"Bon voyage, mam'selle—eh, pardon, madame," he said. He lifted his hat, bowing. To the old woman he turned.

"To you—" he began; she interrupted.

"Her eyes, they will be her mother's," she mumbled, sullenly.

"Which will be well," he smiled. "Her mother had beautiful eyes— wonderful eyes."

"More wonderful than you knew," muttered the old woman. "Had you come a day sooner—"

Still he smiled.

"But I didn't," he replied; and then nodding toward the whimpering thing that the woman held:

"You should guard it well. There is of the best blood of France in its veins." His lips curled, whimsically. "'Tis strange, that, *n'es-ce pas?* In that small piece of carrion which you hold there upon your knees runs the blood of three kings." Again he laughed, musically. He turned.

He had not seen her stoop. The long-bladed knife struck him in the arm, piercing flesh and vein and sinew, sticking there. Slowly he plucked it forth, and turned to her, still smiling.

"You are old, madame. Do not apologize; it was not your fault."

He took the knife delicately by the tip and with a little flip sent it spinning through the air and over the edge of the cliff. And he was gone.

The woman, shrivelled, gray-haired, sinking back in her chair, sat silent. The puling thing upon her knees whimpered. The dying woman upon the rude bed of rope and rush moaned. And that was all.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER THREE.

TWO BOYS AND A GIRL.

To the budding mind of young Jack Schuyler, life was a very pleasant affair. It began each morning at six thirty; and from then on until eight at night, there was something to fill each moment. He didn't care for school, particularly; still, it wasn't difficult enough to cause much discomfort. The natal pains of study were not by any means unbearable inasmuch as he was quick to see and to understand; and furthermore, he was possessed of a retentive memory. In his classes he assumed a position of about eighth from the fore; and he maintained it with but little fluctuation. In the out-of-door sports of small boys, he was usually first—that is, when Tom Blake wasn't. When Tom Blake was, Jack Schuyler was second.

He was a sturdy boy, active, quick, strong of limb and of body. He had earnest, serious eyes of gray-blue, like those of his father. His mouth and chin were delicate, like his mother's. And he was thoughtful, rather than impulsive.

Tom Blake, on the other hand, was impulsive rather than thoughtful. He had dark eyes and ruddy cheeks; and, at the age of nine, he had learned to walk on his hands in a manner that caused acute envy to rankle in the bosom of every boy in the neighborhood. Also, as is most unusual among boys of whatever station, color or instinct, he was self-sacrificing, and more than generous, and loyal to a fault.

Kathryn Blair was all that might have been expected of a daughter of her father and mother. Had you known them, it were difficult to describe further. You have been told that she was lithe, and dainty and very pretty. And she was feminine, very, and yet not unhoysenish; for she played much with Jack Schuyler and Tom Blake. She was natural, and unaffected, and whole-souled and buoyant, quick to laughter, quick to tears, with an inexhaustible fund of merriment, and of sympathy.

Of an afternoon, in early December, they lay, these three young animals, sprawling upon the great room in Blake's house—the room that had been made for play. The gentle rays of the early-setting sun streamed in through the broad windows upon a tumbled heap of discarded playthings, and upon a floor strewn with that which might have appeared to be drifting snow but which in reality was feathers; for there had been a fierce pillow fight; and one of the pillows, under the pressure of rolling little bodies, had burst. Its shrunken shape lay in a far corner of the room, rumped, empty, a husk of the plump thing that it had been but a short time before.

Kathryn Blair, with slender, stockinged legs thrust out before her, was picking from the tangled

masses of her gold-brown hair little clinging bits of down. Tom Blake, beside her lay flat upon his back; and by him, was Jack Schuyler, his head resting upon the heaving diaphragm of the other.

At length Jack Schuyler sat up, looking about him.

"Phew!" he whistled. "It looks like a snowslide.... We'll catch it now!"

Tom Blake rolled over on his stomach. He shook his head.

"Don't worry about that," he said. "Dad won't care, nor mother.... Besides, you're my guests, you know.... What shall we do now?"

Kathryn Blair said:

"I want to get these feathers off first. They stick terribly.... Every time I think I've got hold of one, I find it's a hair." She shifted, so that her back was toward Tom Blake. "Help me, Tom," she commanded.

Obediently he rose to his knees. Resting his left hand upon her shoulder, he plucked, with clumsy masculine fingers at the bits of white that nestled in her hair.... She gave a little cry.

"Ouch! That hurts, Tom! I guess I'd better wait until I get home and have Harris do it. Harris isn't pretty, but she's awfully good; and she doesn't fuss a bit" ... She turned around, suddenly, violet eyes wide with excitement. "Oh! I forgot to tell you!" she cried. "Doctor DeLancey said that maybe he'd bring me a baby brother today!"

Tom Blake and Jack Schuyler both turned to her.

"He did!" they cried almost together.

She nodded, profoundly.

"Yes," she said. "That's why they sent me over here to get all mussed up with feathers. You know baby brothers are bashful. Dr. DeLancey told me all about it. They like to be all alone in the house with their mothers, so that they can get acquainted."

Jack Schuyler rose up on his elbows.

"I know a boy," he said, "that was promised a baby brother and all he got was a sister.... I don't think that was square, do you?"

Tom Blake looked out the window, thoughtfully.

"I don't know," he remarked at length, judicially. "It might not have been the doctor's fault. Sometimes they get 'em mixed, I guess.... And anyhow, sisters aren't so bad. I wish I had one right now—one like you, Kathryn." He turned on her eyes in which were the frank liking and admiration of boyhood.

She tossed the tumbled braids of her hair back over her shoulders.

"I'd rather be a boy, myself," she said. "They don't have to wear dresses and things. And people don't give them dolls when they'd rather have rocking horses.... I wish they'd hurry and bring that brother. I'm just wild to see it!"

Jack Schuyler sat up.

"Well," he assured her, "They'll send over for you when it comes.... What shall we do now?"

He waited patiently for suggestions. Tom Blake and Kathryn Blair sat, foreheads grooved in thought. At length Jack Schuyler cried suddenly:

"I know! Let's play leopard shooting! I saw a picture of one in the geography. It looked just like Fiddles." Fiddles was the plethoric Maltese member of the Blake family. "We've got those tin guns, and we can stalk it. What do you say?"

That which they said was later evidenced; for when Thomas Cathcart Blake entered the front door of his residence that night and started up the stairs, he was met by an excited feline, followed by three equally excited children. And the cat, on seeing him, its cosmogony disrupted to such an extent that it felt itself no longer able to distinguish friend from foe, tried to turn back with the result that its first pursuer fell over it. There was the added result that the next two pursuers tripped upon the sprawling form of the first. And Thomas Cathcart Blake had great difficulty in preventing himself from joining the sprawling parade that tumbled past him to the foot of the stairs, and lay at the bottom, a heap of

tossing legs and arms and ribbons and fur.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER FOUR.

THE CHILD AND THE STRANGER.

It is of necessity that a story such as this should be episodical, lapsical, disconnected. Its inception lies in two countries, and of different people. And it is, in its beginnings, a story of contrasts. So one may be permitted again to say: At a time when pompous, ponderous, white-whiskered, black-suited old Dr. DeLancey was engaged in bringing to the daughter of Kathryn Blair a posthumous baby brother that, in the mystery of things, turned out after all to be a sister, a stranger chanced to be riding at dusk through the deep shades of the Bois du Nord, in Brittany. The path was overhung with spreading boughs; it was tumbled with the wood-litter of a decade. His horse went slowly, lifting each forefoot daintily and placing it carefully. And the stranger permitted the animal to take its own time.

At length he came to a turning. The huge bole of a great oak was at his left. He rounded it. His horse raised its head, nostrils distended, eyes alert, and stopped.

The stranger looked up. It was a strange picture that met his eyes....

At first he did not believe that that which he saw was human. It seemed like some nymph of the wood; for there are nymphs in the Bois du Nord, you know, many of them. Anyone who lives there will tell you that.

But then his eyes fell upon a tumbled heap of clothing; and he knew that it was not a nymph, after all. For nymphs do not wear clothing.

There was a little woodland pool before him. The sun, straining through the great, heavy-leaved boughs, specked it with blots and blotches of gold. Beside it there sat the figure of a girl, naked. She sat there, her slender legs beneath her, her slender body leaning upon one rounded, white arm. Great masses of dead-black hair fell about her glowing shoulders, half covering the arm which supported her. Her other hand clasped her knee. Her dark eyes were gazing before her toward the trunk of the oak. The stranger felt that she knew that he was there; and yet she had not looked at him.

On the bole of the oak was a squirrel. It was motionless, as though carved out of the trunk itself. Beneath it lay coiled a snake. Its eyes were fastened upon those of the squirrel and its flat, ugly head was moving gently to and fro—to and fro—the while its forked tongue played back and forth between its fangs.

They waited there, the stranger and the naked girl. They waited for a long, long time....

By and by the squirrel moved a little. One forefoot crept slowly down the bark of the oak—and then the other—the one hind foot—and then its mate.... And the squirrel was nearer to the snake.

Again they waited, the stranger and the naked girl.... The squirrel crept yet further down the trunk, toward the slow-shifting venomous head....

The horse snorted.... The squirrel raised its head; and darted up the tree trunk. It was gone. And the snake slid noiselessly off into the underbrush.... The naked girl turned dark, deep eyes upon the stranger. She seemed not to mind her nakedness. And to him it seemed not strange that she should not. The horror of it all was deep within him. He murmured, beneath his breath:

"Good God!"

Then he spoke to her, a muttered word, a meaningless word. She swung her body over, sinuously, so that she faced him, slender legs half stretched. The dead black hair rippled over budding breasts. She did not answer. She merely looked at him.

The stranger sat there. His eyes blinked a little; he brushed his hand across them, weakly. Then he looked at her again.

Came a sudden rustling in the brush, beside him. His horse leaped forward, almost unseating him.... He had gone far down the trail before he reined it in. Then he crossed himself. His eyes showed that he was frightened.

There was a turning in the path, a turning that led to the main road. The stranger swung his horse into this turning. He knew that it added to the length of his journey by a good league and a half. And yet he took that turning.

And, later, as he turned into the travelled road, he breathed a deep, deep sigh; and again he crossed himself.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER FIVE.

AS TIME PASSES.

Time passed on over the heads of young Jack Schuyler and young Tom Blake and the daughter of Jimmy Blair. They grew in stature, and in intellect. They grew through the grades of school that lie between nine and fifteen; and then they separated to go to boarding school.

Jack Schuyler and Tom Blake went to one; the daughter of Jimmy Blair and Kathryn Blair to another. And the baby brother that had turned out to be a sister, and who had been named Elinor, stayed at home with the widow of Jimmy Blair; and the widow of Jimmy Blair was now hardly as lonely as were the parents of Jack Schuyler and Tom Blake.

John Stuyvesant Schuyler had built for himself a place at Larchmont, on the Sound. "Grey Rocks," he called it. It was a long, low rambling house, built of stone and of darkened wood. It sat ensconced in a deep phalanx of great, green trees at the head of a great, green lawn. It was not a big house, of pretension, of arrogant wealth, of many servants—of closely-shaven shrubbery and woody landscape gardening. It was, rather, a house that was a home—and there is a distinction—a vast distinction; for there is many a house that is not a home even as there is many a home that is not a house.

Thomas Cathcart Blake built for himself another house, next to it. That also was a rambling, homelike place, with broad halls and deep windows, and wide doors. And the doors he kept open most of the time; for he liked good people, and good people liked him. His big yacht lay during most of the summer a quarter of a mile from the end of his pier. He lived on it part of the time, with Mrs. Thomas Cathcart Blake, and their guests; part of the time he lived on the shore, in the house that he had built. Dr. DeLancey once asked him if he ever moved the yacht from its moorings, and wanted to bet that the sail covers were stuffed with hay. Thomas Cathcart Blake grinned and said that, as for taking the yacht out to sea, he was afraid of getting it wet; and he wouldn't want to bet as to what the sail covers were stuffed with because it might be excelsior, or cotton, or any one of a number of things.

They always had much company at "The Lawns," which was the name of the house, and on the "Idlesse," which was the name of the yacht that seldom sailed; although Dr. DeLancey begged them to rechristen it "The Dock," or "The Stake Boat," or something of the sort, which he thought would be much more appropriate. And among this company, was a great deal, the widow of Jimmy Blair, and her daughter.

Young Jack Schuyler and young Tom Blake got home from college that year about the middle of June. Kathryn Blair was a few days later, owing to certain nonacademic festivities which she didn't want to miss. You can know, how popular and attractive and altogether charming she was when I tell you that she was like her mother at her age; and all New York knows how hard it was even for Jimmy Blair—and there have been very few Jimmy Blairs, you know—to make any perceptible progress amid the choking masses of his competing fellows.

Jack Schuyler and Tom Blake went down to the train, in a trap, to meet her. They hardly recognized the girl with whom they had pillow-fought and leopard-stalked in the dainty figure that descended from the dusty train. A year, with a girl of eighteen, means vast changes; and when that year has been spent at boarding school, it means changes yet more vast, infinitely. Thus, it was that Jack Schuyler and Tom Blake stood, jaws agape, eyes wide-open, and stared—frankly, unequivocally stared.... Then they went to meet her; and both tried to shake hands at once; then both tried to pick up her travelling case at once; and they bumped their heads.

For the first half mile of the drive to the shore, they sat dumb, thinking with sore strainings of mind for things to say, and rejecting each because it didn't seem to be good enough. Finally Tom Blake ventured a remark anent the weather. No harm came to him. So Jack Schuyler ventured one about the wind. He also went scatheless.

At length Tom Blake, looking at the fresh, clean beauty of the girl on the other seat, forgot himself, and voiced, in the moment of his temporary aberration, that which was in the two adolescent male minds.

"Doggone, but you've grown pretty, Kate!" and then blushed.

She blushed, too, and looked at Jack Schuyler. At which he blushed and almost carromed the trap against a telegraph pole. Whereat they all laughed. And from then on, they were themselves.

They were met by her mother at "The Lawns," and by Dr. DeLancey. Dr. DeLancey was not bashful. He pinched her glowing cheek and looked her over, critically.

"A positive symposium of pulchritude," he declared. "I wish I were fifty or seventy-five years younger, by Jove! If you two boys let any rank outsider take her out of the family, you'll have me to reckon with. Yes, by Jove, you will! And you'll find that while I may be a poor fencer, and a worse boxer, I'm still a good spanker!"

[Illustration]

CHAPTER SIX.

AN ACCIDENT.

Dr. DeLancey, sitting under the awning of the after deck of "The Idlesse," and gazing out upon the sound where Jack Schuyler, Tom Blake and Kathryn Blair were defying the laws of nature in a thirty foot knockabout, much to the unspoken anxiety of two fathers and the spoken fear of three mothers, again voiced this thought on the following evening.

"The prettiest, sweetest, finest, loveliest child I ever knew, by Jove," he declared; then, bowing, "present company, of course, excepted.... Yes, sir. If you two old ninnies don't force your sons to marry her, I'll take it into my own hands, damme if I don't, by Jove!"

"But they can't both marry her," protested the widow of Jimmy Blair, placing her arm about the baby brother that had turned out to be a sister.

The Doctor waved his hand, loftily.

"A mere detail," he asserted. "As long as one of 'em marries her, that fixes it, doesn't it? And it doesn't make any difference which one; they're equally fine boys, both of 'em. Look at 'em. Did you ever see better shoulders—better shaped heads—better carriages? Mighty dashed handsome boys, too, they are—get it from their mothers," he bowed elaborately to Mrs. Jon Stuyvesant Schuyler and to Mrs. Thomas Cathcart Blake, then added a look of contempt for, and at their husbands. "Yes, sir," he went on, "they're fine boys, two of 'em—no denying that. And she—she's the right sort—no frills, or airs, or bluffs. Sensible, natural. If I'd have had a few more patients like them, I'd have starved to death long ago. Why, they didn't have even a single measles—not one whooping cough out of the lot. Disgraceful!"

In the meanwhile, far out on the sound, the little knockabout was heeling far over in the playful breath of the summer breeze. Tom Blake, bare-headed, bare-armed, was at the tiller. Jack Schuyler, also bare-headed and bare-armed, sat on the after overhang, tending the sheet, and bracing muscular legs against the swirling seas that, leaping over the low freeboard, tried to swirl him off among them. Kathryn Blair, leaned lithely against the weather rail, little, white—canvas-shod feet braced, skirts whipping about her slender body, rounded arms gripping the wet edge of the cockpit rail. The gold-brown hair, in loosened strands, whipped across her tanned cheek; her gown, open at the throat, revealed a glimpse of straight, perfectly-poised throat; her lips were parted and her breath came fast in the excitement of it.

Blake held the knockabout to its course, with the confidence of youth in his prowess, against them. The little boat leaped forward from crest to crest, stopping between to shake the water from its deck. Above was the blue sky—all about them the blue water, white crested.

The girl, bracing herself against a particularly hard pitch of the boat, balancing herself lightly, as the craft recovered and again leaped forward, cried:

"Isn't this fine!"

Blake nodded. Schuyler, waist deep in a swooping sea, did not hear... The

Long Island shore was close at hand now.

Suddenly Blake shouted: "Hard a lee!" and jammed the tiller over; Schuyler, on the after overhang, scrambled fast to take in the slack of the sheet. Kathryn Blair bent, to avoid the swinging boom.

The little boat swung about as though on a pivot. The wind filled the sail; she sped forward like a hawk unhooded.

Then something happened. A stay parted; there was a great, grinding crack, followed by the snapping and whipping of canvas. And the mast fell.

Schuyler was knocked over into the water by the boom. It struck him fair upon the brow. Kathryn, springing to catch him, was hit by the flapping canvas. She went overboard, too, and under the sail.

Blake, on the weather side, was free from the wreck. Without even stopping to turn, he dove backward from the cockpit. Under the cold, green water he went. He struck out, blindly, frenziedly. His hand felt something that was not canvas and yet was cloth—struck, and gripped. Then, holding his breath still until he thought his lungs would burst, he felt his way out from under the sail. The rail of the boat was at hand; he gripped it. And he dragged Kathryn to it.

"Hold on!" he cried in her ear. "Jack's gone!"

Though but half conscious, she understood. Her firm, white fingers gripped the cutting edge of the cockpit rail; she nodded.

Blake struck out again. He had tried to remember where he had seen Schuyler disappear. Four strokes brought him to the spot; and then he dove.

Again his hand struck something. Again he pulled, and tugged, and fought. At length he was at the surface. It was Schuyler. His eyes were closed.

The tide, setting down the sound, was carrying the boat from him; he set his teeth. He caught Schuyler by the neck of his jersey, over his own shoulder, bringing his head out of water.

And he struck out, with his free arm, desperately.

It seemed as though he would never make progress. A dead weight, in the water, is hard to drag. Every ounce of strength that was in his strong, young body he threw into those long, quivering strokes. He must get to the boat! He *must!* The shore was too far away.... He stopped for a minute, treading water. There was no sail in sight. He flattened out in the water again, breasting it with all his power.

Stroke after stroke he took—stroke after stroke—reaching with strong right arm, thrusting with strong legs. The boat was no nearer.... He kept on, doggedly.... He could feel that his strokes were getting weaker; his mouth was under water more than half the time; he had to raise up to breathe.... But he fought on.... He began to grow dizzy—there was a ringing in his ears....

Suddenly he thought he saw, right before him, the face of Kathryn Blair. He knew that he did not; he thought he did; that was all. Then, suddenly, his fingers caught a rope; the face was still there; and the rope that he held led to where it was caught between white, even teeth.

A great wave hit him a buffet, full in the face; it cleared his senses, for a moment; yet perhaps it was more due to the feel of the rope in his fingers.... Then he knew that it was she—that the face was real, and the rope.... Went surging through his mind that she, taking the end of the sheet in her teeth, had swum to him, and to Schuyler—and that to her they both owed their lives.

She was beside him, now, swimming strongly. She gripped an arm of the unconscious Schuyler.... Together, she and Blake, dividing the weight, slowly, inch by inch, fought their way along the rope. At length they reached the side of the swamped knockabout.... Blake crawled upon its slippery deck. He lay for a moment, helpless; she supported Schuyler. Then he essayed to aid her again; and together they began to lift him out of the water, and to safety.

Dr. DeLancey, from the after deck of "The Idlesse," had seen the accident. A minute later, he, John Stuyvesant Schuyler, Thomas Cathcart Blake, the captain of "The Idlesse," and two sailors were in the launch.... They reached the side of the knockabout as Blake and Kathryn were dragging Jack Schuyler from the water; and they took him into the other boat. Blake, in his father's clutch, followed. At the same time, Dr. DeLancey leaned over to grasp Kathryn. But she shook her head, and smiled, weakly:

"No," she said. "I—I had to—to take off part of my clothes. I—"

Dr. DeLancey was an old man; some assert that he fell overboard. However, be that as it may, when

he came to the surface, he had his arm around Kathryn Blair, and she had his long coat draped around her slender figure.... And, as they lifted her to the deck, she fainted.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER SEVEN.

AN INCIDENT.

Destiny has a sense of humor; a sense of humor sardonic, it is true, cruel, sometimes grewsome; and yet it is a sense of humor. Otherwise—

There had been in France a man of the nobility—a man in whose veins flowed the blood of three kings—a man handsome of face, graceful of figure, debonair—a man who had sinned much, and who had paid for that sinning only in the sufferings of others; and they had been many.

That man had many estates—many servants—many horses—much money. He had been to Brittany twice; and only twice. Yet he went a third time, and after five years. He went alone. He rode his horse through the narrow, brush-grown path by which had gone the stranger who had seen the naked girl, at the edge of the woodland pool, five years before. And he came, at length, to the edge of the wood, and to the clearing where lay the little hut, smoky, dirty, littered.

He dismounted from his horse, there, why, he did not know. He went forward, to the hut.

An old woman, bent, white haired, sat on a rude chair, in the sun, beside the door. She looked up as he approached. She, in no way, heeded the elaborate bow that he made—a graceful bow, low and sweeping, and yet a salutation sarcastic.

"*Bon jour*, madame," he began. "Madame looks well; but Death is never far from the aged.... It should be a consolation," looking about him, casually, "for one who lives as madame."

The shrivelled old woman made no answer.

The man went on, evenly, the while tapping; with the end of his slender crop a booted leg:

"*Eh bien*, I have come, as you see. The paternal passion will not down in the breast of a man domestically inclined." He laughed. "I have been going about, seeing my families," he smiled. "It has been interesting—drolly interesting. *Ma foi!*" Yet again he laughed, musically. "There have been pleadings, and revilings—tears, and curses—bended knees, and unbended arms." He indicated with a graceful gesture a deep cut upon the back of his left hand. "It was a woman—a very pretty woman," he explained. "At least, she had been pretty; and she was again pretty; when she did that. Her eyes—it was like lighting a fire in a cave. Did you ever light a fire in a cave, madame?" he queried, gently, graciously; and then: "But, of course not! Women kindle their fires in stoves—or fireplaces. It is for men to light the fires of caves." Yet once more he laughed, softly.

The old woman, with the white, wispy hair, still was silent, motionless; though her eyes spoke. And that which they spoke, his eyes heard; and once more he laughed.

"I had a daughter here," he continued. "Did I not? Or was it a son? *Ma foi!* It were difficult—ah, yes! I remember now! A daughter. A little, red, hairless, dirty thing she was. I have a great curiosity—the blood of three kings, you know; surely that would overcome the blood of the good God knows how many peasant swine. She is not red, and hairless, and dirty now, in faith! She is clean-limbed, and straight, and white. A thousand louis to a sou, that she is!" ... His brow was creased in the travail or retrospection.

"I gave her a name, did I not?" he asked. "It seems to me—ah, yes. Rien, it was. A very pretty name—yes, an excellent name—meaning much and little—everything, and yet nothing." He laughed at his own conceit, softly. "Tell me, where is she now? It might be that she is dead, eh?" He eyed the old woman, closely; then he shook his head. "No," he went on, "she is not dead. She—"

He had seen nothing, that is certain. Yet, suddenly he ceased in his speech; the smile left his lips; and slowly, very slowly, he turned.

She was standing there, behind him, her eyes upon him.... She was straight, and slender, and perfectly formed. A single garment covered her, running across one shoulder, reaching to her knees. It left one breast exposed, and the white, slender legs and perfect feet. She stood in a posture of infinite

grace—of infinite poise. She looked at him.

Then it was that the shrivelled old woman spoke. She said to the girl:

"*Votre pere.*"

And that was all.

The child looked at the man; the man looked at the child; and so for a long, long time they stood eye upon eye.... At length she began to smile a little, with her lips. But he did not smile....

After a long, long time, she took a slow, sinuous step toward him—then another.... He stepped back, still looking at her, his eyes still on hers.... He was back to the great cliff—the sheer cliff at the base of which the huge seas ever beat in sullen, unceasing impotence.... Yet, another step she took, toward him....

His breath came chokingly, gaspingly. Yet another step he took, away from her.... Yet another.... And then....

It was an accident, perhaps. Yes, of course; it must have been an accident. He had not noticed.... For, as again she advanced, her eyes on his, his eyes on hers, again he retreated. And suddenly, in utter silence save for the rending of crumbling earth and uprooted grass, he slid over the edge of the great rock.... Before the eyes of the girl lay only the restless, heaving sea. and beyond the dull gray of the horizon and the cupped sky.

She turned, slowly, smiling a little. The shrivelled, shrunken old woman bent her head forward upon her flat breast, thrice.

"*Bien,*" she muttered. And that was all.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER EIGHT.

OF CERTAIN GOINGS.

It so happened that, on the winter after Jack Schuyler and Tom Blake graduated from college, death came to the big houses on the Avenue. Mrs. John Stuyvesant Schuyler went first; Mrs. Thomas Cathcart Blake went, almost, with her; for she had been by the bedside of her friend during all her illness; and her friend, going, had bestowed upon her its horrible heritage. And so she went, too.

Their going left in the two great houses, monstrous voids that might never be filled. John Stuyvesant Schuyler and Thomas Cathcart Blake loved their wives; and when a man has loved a woman, and that woman his wife, as these two had loved, it seems in a way to disrupt the cosmogony of things. It takes ambition from the brain, and the stamina from the spine; and the days are very, very long, while the nights are yet infinitely longer.

Thomas Cathcart Blake, in the vastness of all that now was not, forgot to care for himself. He, who had been jovial, became silent. Some times, of nights, he would walk alone for hours. The weather made no difference—in fact, he seldom noticed what the weather was. He was an old man now, close to sixty....

Dr. DeLancey, on a night visit, met him one thick, sodden night at the corner of Thirty-third Street and the Avenue, coming from the club. The good doctor bumbled out of his brougham, seized him by the arm and drew him wet and dripping into its protected interior.

"You fossiliferous-headed old chump," he howled, exasperatedly. "You pin-headed old amphibian. If your sole and utter ambition is to get pneumonia and die, I don't know any way in which you can better achieve your purpose. Sit down in the corner there and drink this," he extracted from his case a little flask of brandy, "or I'll ask the horse to come in and bite you!"

"Turn around there, Mose!" he yelled, "and drive to Mr. Blake's house."

Mose did so; and once there, the doctor, abusing and bullying his patient, got him upstairs and into the bed, and then applied to the protesting man who seldom had known what it was even to have a cold, all manner of exposorial antidotes.

"But the patient that you were going to see!" protested Thomas Cathcart Blake.

"No friend of mine," returned Dr. DeLancey. "Only a patient. Patients are plenty, but friends are few. Let him get someone else, or die, as he chooses. It's none of my business. Here, drink this." And he poured between the protesting lips of Thomas Cathcart Blake a nauseating draught of something that was most malodorous; for Dr. DeLancey was an allopath, and a good one.

But, good as he was, he was too late. Pneumonia had been before him; and, two weeks later, in spite of all that the good doctor, and several other equally good doctors, could do, Thomas Cathcart Blake died. And he didn't seem sorry at going.

Before he went, he called to him his son, and to that son he said many things. Most of the things that he said are neither your business nor mine. But of the things that he said, we may know one. He wanted his son to marry the daughter of the widow of Jimmy Blair.

Young Tom Blake, between the sobs that are becoming a man, answered:

"I want to, dad. I've always wanted to. And I will, if I can."

His father counselled, weakly:

"Get her honestly, boy, or not at all. If you get her, cherish her—give her everything that there is in you to give—for there's nothing that a man can give that a good woman doesn't deserve. Now, God bless you, son— and—go."

Tom Blake clung to the sheets. It was hard to lose such a father and such a mother, and all within a six month. He cried, as you would cry, or I, and be glad that crying might be.... Dr. DeLancey, at length, managed to loosen his clenching fingers. Dr. DeLancey was crying, too; the tears ran down his veined cheeks to lose themselves in the hair of his cheeks. He tried to fume and fuss and splutter, as was his wont; but he couldn't. He could just put his hand around Tom Blake's heaving young shoulders, listen to his choking, broken sobs and say, over and over, and over again: "There, there, my boy! There, there! There, there!"

It's pretty hard, you know, to lose a father and a mother like that, and all within six months.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER NINE.

OF CERTAIN OTHER GOINGS.

John Stuyvesant Schuyler's end was different. He was a man reserved—a man who thought much and told little. His illness baffled Dr. DeLancey at first; but then he knew what the disease was; although to it he could give no polysyllabic name of Latin, and for it he could prescribe no remedies; for the cure had gone from the hands of man into the hands of God. And to the hands of God, John Stuyvesant Schuyler went, at length, to find it; and who shall say that his quest was unsuccessful?

He, too, on his dying bed called his son to him; and to this son he said many things; and among these things was that it had ever been the dearest wish of her that had gone as well as of him that was about to go that their son should wed the daughter of the widow of Jimmy Blair.

And Jack Schuyler, sobbing by the side of the great, mahogany bed in the great, dark room, even as he had sobbed beside the same bed in the same room so short a time before, promised, as Tom Blake had promised, that all that he might do to bring to wife the girl his parents desired for him as wife, he would do; and not from any obeisance to filial reasons, but because he wanted to—because he loved her—had always loved her.

It was good old Dr. DeLancey who repeated his offices in this case, as in the other; and he repeated them in the same way, patting the broad, throbbing young shoulders—reiterating with twitching lips, his "There, there, boy! There, there, there!"—reiterating it uselessly—and knowing that it was uselessly that he reiterated—and yet helpless in the vast profundity of helplessness that was his.

And that same year did Dr. DeLancey lose yet another friend that was a patient—a patient that was a friend. It was the violet-eyed widow of Jimmy Blair. And all night long, from gray dusk until crimson dawn, Dr. DeLancey had sat in the darkened parlor of the warm little house of red brick; he had sat in a

rocking chair, and on either old knee he had held a sob-wracked, grief-torn, motherless girl, the one herself almost old enough to be a mother. And again he had cried. Some doctors may lose through oft-recurrence visualized their susceptibility to suffering; but Dr. DeLancey was not of them. And when he stumbled on stiffened legs out of the darkened parlor and into the incongruous mellow radiance of the spring sunshine, his eyes were still wet, and he didn't care who knew it.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER TEN.

TWO BOYS AND A DOCTOR.

Young Jack Schuyler and young Blake, a week later, went to see the doctor in his office. He looked up from his paper.

"Well?" he said.

Tom Blake cleared his throat.

"We wanted to ask you, Doctor," he began, "if—"

"Eh," assisted Jack Schuyler; "that is, we wanted to know—"

"—you see, that is—I—"

"—yes, we thought—"

"—you know, Mrs. Blair—"

The doctor rose; he stood between the two broad-shouldered, erect young men, placing a hand on the arm of each.

"It's all right," he assured them. "Don't you worry."

"But," protested Tom Blake, "we've got so much money, and they—Isn't there some way that you can fix it, doctor? You know how to do these things; and we're so helpless."

"And," elaborated Jack Schuyler, "they'd never suspect you, you know."

"I tell you it's all fixed," returned the doctor, with testiness that from him was cordiality rampant. "Jimmy Blair left a very comfortable estate, in trust. They'll have all they want as long as they live."

He didn't tell them—that is, not then, though later he did—that one of the last acts of John Stuyvesant Schuyler and Thomas Cathcart Blake had been to walk solemnly, side by side, across the street and tell the widow of Jimmy Blair, that, in accordance with the ante-mortem desires of her late husband, they had devoted a certain portion of the fortune that he had left to the establishment of a trust fund that would yield her an annual income of \$12,000. He didn't tell them, then. Later he did. He couldn't help it. But at that time—

He slapped them both on the back, and sent them from the room. He stood, on the top step of the flight that led from sidewalk to front door, and watched them swing, broad-shouldered, supple, erect, down the bright Avenue.

"Now why in thunder," he asked of himself, slowly, "didn't I ever get married?" And then, "Shut up, you old fool," he soliloquized. And he turned, and, re-entering the house, slammed the door behind him.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER ELEVEN.

A PROPOSAL.

Blake waited in the embrasure of the window, gazing down upon the Avenue below, with its confusion of moving vehicles and pedestrians. The June sun was overhead, warming the earth with gentle, kindly glow. The breath of summer was in the air; it came to him, brushing the curtains against him, cooling

his brow. It was grateful to his nostrils, and to his lungs; and he took of it a great, deep breath. His broad shoulders squared; his deep, full chest heaved.

An omnibus stopped on the corner. He watched the horses throw themselves against their collars; he watched the bulky vehicle gather headway, and move on, with ever increasing momentum, through the maze of brougham and cab and coach and landau.

As the coach was lost to view there came steps, light and quick, upon the stairs; the door opened and there stood before him the daughter of Jimmy Blair. She had been abroad, under chaperonage, for a year....

He did not know that she could be so beautiful—he did not know that anyone could ever hope to be as beautiful as was she who stood before him. Violet eyes were no deeper—lips no more red—teeth no whiter—nor was the perfect oval of her sun-kissed cheek any the more perfect. Yet, there was something—the indefinable something that marks the transition of a beautiful girl from beautiful girlhood to glorious womanhood.... He felt a strange emptiness within him; it was almost as though he were appalled by so much beauty—so much glory.

There was a gladness—a natural, unaffected, real gladness in her violet eyes that glowed in greeting. She thrust forth a tiny white hand.... He had been wont to kiss her, on meeting and on parting. Now it never occurred to him.

"Tom!" she cried. "I'm so, so glad to see you again. It's been terribly lonely. As fast as I'd begin to learn one language, they'd move me somewhere else and I'd have to start all over again! And now I hardly know whether or not I know any language at all! ... Where's Jack? I expected that, of course, he would come with you."

"He'll be here bye-and-bye, Kate...." Blake replied.

She seated herself, crossing one knee above the other, interlocking about it slender, white fingers.

"You must have so much to tell me, Tom!" she bubbled, all animation, gladness, eagerness. "Begin! Please, begin! And then I'll tell you everything. Oh, isn't it exciting to go away and come back again!"

"I have a lot to tell you," he said, slowly.

"Why, you speak so seriously, Tom. Aren't you glad to see me?"

"I'm afraid nobody but myself knows how glad.... Kate, I hardly know how to begin what I want to say. I—it's hard; not having seen you so long, makes it harder. I—"

She cried, in pretty amazement: "But what in the world is it? Tom! You almost frighten me! I haven't done anything wrong, have I? Shall I be put to bed without my supper? ... Do speak, Tom. Tell me what all this mystery is."

Still slowly, hands folding and unfolding, dark eyes upon hers of violet, he continued:

"Kate, Jack Schuyler loves you; and I lo—"

He had intended to say more; and what that more was one would but have had to look into his eyes to tell; but he had been looking into hers; he had seen the gleam that had leaped there at his words; and that is why he did not finish.

"Tom!" she exclaimed, softly.... And then, "Did Jack tell you that— himself?"

He nodded.

"He was afraid to tell me himself?"

Again he nodded. It was not so. But he lied; as would you, or I, had we been as good a man as he. He had come there knowing that a woman loves but one man. He had come there knowing that, if Schuyler were not the man she loved, thereby he would be saved, and she would be saved, much unpleasantness. He had hoped that it was he himself that she loved. Yet he had feared that it was not. And he had known that whether it were he who asked, or Schuyler, or any man, it would make no difference; for when a woman like that loves a man, it is that man alone she loves; and the rest means nothing. No thought of an unfair advantage was in his mind. In such a case there could be no such thing as that. It was only whether or not she loved one of them, and if so, which one; and beyond that there was nothing—nothing except that he wished to take from Schuyler any unhappiness that might lie there for him. For he was a friend such as few men may ever have and, having, may pray to keep.

And now he knew the answer. It was in the depths of the violet eyes—in the eagerness of lips and lithe, supple body—it was of her—about her. Blake's lips became thin; his jaws set; his eyes half shut. To have lost a father, and a mother, and such a girl as was she, and all within an eighteen month, was bitter, indeed.

He heard her say, as from a great distance:

"It was fine of you to come like this, Tom.... I do love Jack; I thought once, that I loved you, Tom.... That was strange, wasn't it? It's strange to sit here now, with you, telling you of it.... Though, of course, you don't care.... He will come soon, won't he? You don't know how I've missed him, Tom.... It would be a strange situation, wouldn't it, if we hadn't known one another so well, and cared for one another, so deeply in such a friendly, brother-and-sisterly sort of way.... I think, in some ways, I ought to be angry with Jack for not coming himself.... But it's as though you were my big brother, Tom.... You know how Jack feels toward me; and so you are anxious to act as sort of a buffer, in case everything isn't—eh—as it should be.... It was fine of you, Tom; and you know how I appreciate it! ..."

What else she said, he did not know. It seemed a thousand, thousand years ere he rose to his feet. He was suffering—When a woman loves, her intuition is dead....

At length he found himself on the street. But the sunshine was gone, and the air was dead....

He found Schuyler, and told him.... He watched him leap through the door, forgetting his hat—heard him pounding down the hall—heard the street door as it slammed behind him. And then—

It's pretty hard, you know, to lose a father, and a mother, and such a girl as the daughter of Jimmy Blair; and all within an eighteen month.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER TWELVE.

A FOREIGN MISSION

In the next few years, God was indeed good to John Schuyler. Health he kept; honors came to him, and the respect of men and of women. There were those who loved him, many; and of those who hated him there were a few; which is well, inasmuch as the hatred of some men may be the highest praise—the highest favor—that they have to bestow.

A child came to them, at length—to him and to the daughter of Jimmy Blair; and that child was as like to the daughter of Jimmy Blair as the daughter had been like her mother.

A part of the time they lived in the city; but most of their days were spent out at the Larchmont place, on the Sound, that John Stuyvesant Schuyler had built so long ago. And there they were very, very happy.

The quiet, peaceful beauty of "Grey Rocks" more than ever appealed to the soul of Tom Blake as he stood upon the bridge of his yacht, "The Vagrant," and watched the ever-enlarging lawn apparently rush toward him. He closed his eyes, a little. The sun was very bright.... He turned toward the Long Island shore, hazy and unreal in the mists of the morning.... When he turned back again, the huge, sea-going craft, a thing of glistening white and shining brass, was making a wide, graceful sweep in the churning water, and the house had ceased to rush down upon him. It now stood inviting, beckoning, as close at hand as it were safe to be.

A launch was lowered, and the owner's gangway dropped. And in another moment, Blake stood, balancing himself nicely against the rolling of the little craft, as it rushed through the blue-gray water toward the landing pier at the foot of the velvet lawn.

Like one who, in haste, yet longs to loiter Blake made his way across the sward to where, jutting out from a corner of the house, a tiny bay window thrust itself forth among a confusion of tangled nasturtiums, copper-colored, yellow, crimson son. With the privileged assurance of one long known and long loved, he thrust open the left hand window, which extended to the ground, and entered the room.

There came a little, delighted cry of surprise; a rather uncertain, "Oh, Mr. Tom!" and in another instant he was enveloped in a tiny cloud of lace and ribbons and primly starched linen while two bare, brown little legs waved wildly about his breast, a pair of very sticky lips were set against his own, and

his neck found itself in the clasp of tiny fingers that had known orange-juice and oat-meal and sugar—and possibly jam— since they had had intimate association of water.

At length he set her down upon the floor, gently.

"Well, well, little partner," he said, grinning sociably, "that most surely was a succulent salute.... I perceive from the remainder of your repast" his eyes had fallen upon the little breakfast table and the over-turned high-chair which, with infinite dignity unbent, the butler was rescuing from prostration "that you like a little oatmeal on your sugar."

"I do," confessed the child, friendly. "But Woberts doesn't. Do you, Woberts?" Without waiting for the corroboration of the somewhat perturbed Roberts, she turned again to Blake. "I like heaps and heaps of sugar.... Woberts gives it to me when there isn't anyone looking, don't you, Woberts?" And then, very seriously, she added, "I like Woberts"

Blake laughed, a low, rumbling, ringing laugh.

"I don't blame you," he said. "I used to have sugar once.... I liked those who gave it to me."

He picked her up and set her again in the high-chair, moving it close to the table with its dainty china and center-piece of pink carnations.

The child looked up at him, half wondering. She was pretty—very pretty— with serious, round violet eyes, sun-kissed cheeks, and hair of the soft brown that is of kin to gold.

"Don't you get any sugar now?" she asked, very seriously.

He shook his head.

"Not any?" she persisted. "Never?"

"Not any," he replied, gravely. "Never."

Swiftly she picked up the little silver sugar jar; she cast an investigative eye up at the solemn visage of the butler.

"Mr. Tom can have some of ours, can't he, Woberts?" she inquired, gravely tendering the bowl to Blake, who accepted it just as gravely.

"I thank you," he said, very seriously. "It is kind of you.... But, do you know, I was speaking rather of figurative sugar."

The child shook her head, perplexedly.

"I don't think we have that kind," she ventured. "We have powdered sugar, and loaf sugar, and gran—granulated," she syllablized it, calling it "gran-u-lat-ed"—"and we have pulverized sugar, too. But I don't believe we have fig—the kind you said.... I'm sorry."

He smiled a little—a smile of the lips.

"It doesn't matter," he said, slowly. "Really it doesn't. You know I haven't had any for so long that I've quite forgotten the taste of it.... Where's daddy this morning?"

"Daddy and mother dear are saying goodbye to Auntie," the child replied, making in the oatmeal before her a miniature Panama Canal and watching the thick cream trickle slowly from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Blake turned to the butler.

"How is Mrs. VanVorst this morning, Roberts?" he asked. "Still very ill, sir," returned the butler. "Very ill indeed."

"Not dangerously?"

"We 'opes not, sir. But she's still very low, sir."

Blake turned one fist in the palm of the other hand.

"Why, I thought from the wireless that Mr. Schuyler sent me that she was getting along splendidly. I —"

He stopped, abruptly. There had entered the breakfast room the wife of John Schuyler. She saw Blake and came forward, hand outstretched, welcome in her eyes. She had come to be very like her child—her child and Schuyler's—had the daughter of Jimmy Blair—she was like her child grown up, glorified into womanhood. Her hair was the same gold-brown, a little unruly, clinging against her temples, nestling at neck-nape. Her eyes were the same deep violet—perhaps a little darker—a little softer—a little less wondering; for years bring knowledge, and when one begins to know, then one must cease, somewhat, to wonder. She had the soft, brown, sun-kissed cheeks of her child, too, rounded and smooth, with the red blood tinting them to a delicate pink. She had the finely-modelled, cleanly-cut nose, and the expressive, sensitive mouth with its red lips, and white teeth. And her chin was both beautiful and firm.

She moved lithely across the room to where Blake stood. He took her hand.

"Tom," she began, cordially. Her voice was low and deep, and very soft. "We're so glad to see you.... You got Jack's message, then? We were afraid you wouldn't."

Blake nodded.

"Caught it off Point Judith," he replied. "You should have seen us 'bout ship and come spattering down the Sound. Those blockade-running persons could have gained points from us. We burned the bulwarks, the cargo and most of my cigars. It looks as though we did so wisely, too; for we haven't much time to spare, have we?"

"We leave in half an hour," she returned. "Sit down, Tom.... Jack will be here soon."

"But what's it all about?" he asked. He sank into a chair, elbows on knees, fingers clasped.

"Jack's trip abroad?"

He nodded.

"It's something at the Court of St. James. I don't know exactly; but it's very imposing, and important, and epoch-making. Jack spent all day yesterday with the President and Secretary of State."

"Well, well, well! That certainly is immense!" She was standing beside the table. Slowly her fingers plucked a carnation from the cluster before her. Violet eyes were upon it.

"Is it?" she asked, slowly.

"Isn't it?" he queried, surprised.

She paused a moment; and then, swiftly:

"Oh, I don't know. I—"

Blake waited. But she did not go on. At length he spoke:

"How long will he be gone?"

"Maybe two months," she returned.... "It will be the first time that we've been apart for more than a day or two since we were married.... I— I suppose that's silly, isn't it?"

"If that's silly, it's too bad anyone ever gets sensible," was his assuring reply.

She had risen. Slowly she went around behind the little high chair. Leaning lithely over, she laid her cheek against that of her child, soft, rounded arms pressing her close. And then she looked at Blake, eyes to eyes.

"I don't like it, Tom," she said, very slowly.

"But," he protested, "it's a big honor—a great honor—an appointment like this, from the President."

"Yes," she answered, thoughtfully. "It is a big honor. And I suppose that I should be very, very happy—Of course, in a way, I am." Then, suddenly: "But I'm not. I don't like it, Tom. I try to like it. I tell myself that I ought to like it. And yet I can't. Happiness is more than honors; and we are happy here—as happy as it is possible for two people" her eyes, laden of the mother love, fell upon the child that was hers, "for three people," she corrected, "to be. We have everything we need—everything we ought to want. I'd rather have just peace, and quiet and contentment, than all the honors there are."

"And yet—"

"I mustn't stand in the way of his advancement, you mean. I know that; and I haven't.... You know he left it all to me; and I said, 'Go.' It hurt, too, Tom.... I didn't want that he should go. I don't know why.... I—" she stopped. The child had finished her oatmeal. Lithely, the mother, stooping, lifted her from the chair, held her close for a tiny minute and then, kissing her, set her down upon the floor.

"Run along, dearie," she directed. "Tell Mawkins to get you dressed."

She watched the graceful, pretty child until she vanished through the door. Slowly she walked to the window. Hands clasped behind her she stood, gazing across the sunlit lawn—across the dancing, flashing waters of the Sound. A big, black schooner, a mountain of bellying whiteness superimposed upon a tiny streak of hull, was standing off for the Long Island shore. Her eyes followed it.

Blake, lids half closed, as a man who seeks within the denseness of masculine brain for something that lieth not therein, considered for a long moment, eyes upon the perfect figure of perfect womanhood before him. At length he spoke.

"It doesn't seem to me," he began, "that it means either very much or very little." He went on, more lightly: "Two months isn't such a long time, you know, after all. He'll soon be back, laden with honors. And then, because he was raised on the seacoast and doesn't know the difference between a Lima bean and a bole weevil, they'll probably make him Secretary of Agriculture."

She was still gazing at the vanishing sail; she had not heard his words.

He leaned back in his chair, a little, watching her. At length he sighed, and murmured to himself:

"To him that hath, shall be given all they can take away from him that hathn't."

[Illustration]

CHAPTER THIRTEEN.

THE GOING.

John Schuyler had come to be a big man and a broad one—big in the great things of life that sometimes are so small, big in the small things of life that sometimes are so great. Broad of mind, as well as broad of shoulder he was. Forty years of age now, his hair, by the habit of thought, was tinged with gray at the temples; yet skin and complexion were as those of a boy. Quick in movement, agile, alert, thrilling with vitality and virility, his pleasures were, as they had always been, the pleasures of the great out-of-doors. A yachtsman, his big yawl, the "Manana," was known in every club port from Gravesend to Bar Harbor. He motored. He rode. He played tennis, and golf, and squash, and racquets. He was an expert swimmer, a skilful fencer, a clever boxer. And, more wonderful than the combination of these things was the fact that he found time away from his work to do them all, and to enjoy them with the youthful, contagious, effervescent enthusiasm of a man of half his age.

It showed in his well-set-up, well-poised body. It showed in the expression of his clear-cut bronzed features. It showed in every little shift of pose, every little turn of his well-shaped head, as he stood, leaning gracefully against the ledge of the bay window, talking with Blake; for Mrs. Schuyler and Muriel had gone to make ready for the trip to the city, and to the dock.

"I don't like to leave it, Tom," he said slowly, his eyes roaming over the bright, little room. "I don't like to leave it even to hobnob with crowned heads, and to take tea with dukes, earls, princes and kings, to say nothing of mere lords. My world is right here; and it's all the world I want, Tom. It's bounded on the south by the sound, on the north by the property of the municipality, on the east and west by somebody else's worlds, and above by eternity." Blake lighted a cigar.

"Then what are you going for?" he asked, practically.

Schuyler shrugged his shoulders.

"I wonder," he replied.

"Want me to tell you?" queried the other.

"I should be obliged," he said with a smile.

"Well," began Blake, placing finger ends to finger ends, judicially. "In the first place, you're

ambitious. You like the plaudits of the populace. You see here a chance to get about a million per cent on your investment. Whereby you stick two months time and a little effort into the proposition and draw down a position that means sitting beside the chief executive and trying to look as though you knew what he was talking about. Also a chance to live in Washington and cut figure eights in the diplomatic circles. All of which is perfectly natural, nothing at all to your discredit, and furthermore shows whence come the few good men, who, sticking their heels in, are trying to keep the country from going to the demnition bow-wows. Am I right?"

Schuyler watched a little ring of blue smoke rising to the ceiling.

"No," he answered, slowly, "you're wrong. I care nothing for the plaudits of the populace. I'm ambitious, in a way; but when that way requires me to leave the people—the things—that I love, then ambition chameleonizes and I become ambitious antithetically. Furthermore, I loathe the climate of Washington; and all the society I want, I can find right in my home— with the exception of yourself."

"Which is not so much of an exception, after all," commented Blake; "because, when it comes to sticking around, I'm the original young Mr. Glue."

"You know, Tom," went on Schuyler, "I don't like to take any chances with a happiness such as mine.... I wonder, sometimes, if I really know how happy I am. One can get used to happiness, you know, just as to other things—except unhappiness."

"Hum," snorted Blake. "I've got used to that, even. Dad—burn it all, nothing ever goes right with me—except money; and that's no good without the rest. Money is merely an agreeable accessory. To have money and nothing with it is like having an olive and no cocktail to put it in. If I eat what I like, I get sick. I'm always either forty pounds too heavy or twenty pounds too light. I'm continually dieting or training and wondering why in Sam Hill I'm doing either. I have to live alone—to spend my evening at theatres or clubs—I am a man who would willingly give up all his clubs for one large pair of pink carpet slippers, and the theatres for a corpulent, aristocratic Maltese cat, with a baritone purr."

Schuyler, immersed in his own thoughts, had not been listening.

Blake eyed him, whimsically.

"Ain't I the gabby thing, though?" he remarked, at length. And then:

"A couple of million dollars for your thoughts, sweet chuck."

"I was thinking how near I came to turning this all down—and how I'm sort of sorry that I didn't."

"Nell's better, isn't she?" queried Blake, suddenly.

"Better, yes; but not out of danger. Why?"

"Why," returned Blake, "it just occurred to me—see here, old man, I've nothing much to do. Can't I stick around here? And then you can take Kate and Muriel with you."

"That's good of you, Tom," said Schuyler, smiling a little. "But a bachelor around a sick room is of about as much use as an elephant at a pink tea.... No, Kate and I have talked it all over, and, under the conditions, she has decided to stay at home. It'll be mighty hard, though—mighty hard.... It must be nearly time to leave."

Blake looked at his watch.

"Nine fifty," he said. "What time does the train go?"

Schuyler did not answer; for just then there entered the room a tall, clean-cut young fellow of thirty, dressed with quiet immaculacy. It was Parks, John Schuyler's secretary.

To him Schuyler turned.

"Is everything ready, Parks?" he asked.

"Everything," was the reply. "And the car is waiting."

"Mrs. Schuyler?"

"Is in the hall."

"You have the documents that we selected?"

"Here, sir." Parks touched with the fingers of his right hand the little satchel of black seal that he carried beneath his left arm.

"How much time have we?"

"We should leave within a very few minutes now."

"Very well. We'll be right there."

As Parks left the room, Blake turned to his friend.

"Jack," he exclaimed, "it makes me sore every time I look at you. Why in thunder can't I get in once in a while? Nothing would suit me better than to go over and buy the king a glass of half and half and mix around with the diplomats and settle the affairs of nations. But they wouldn't let me send cucumber seeds to the mattress-faced constituency of Skaneateles county if I should offer to pay for the job. I've got everything I don't want—except the measles—and everything I do want, I can't get. I want a home. What have I? A box stall with nobody in it but a man to curry me; and he's curried me so often that he's lost all respect for me. I want to stop being merely ornamental and become useful; but when I say so, everyone hands me the jocose and jibing jeer and proceeds to lock up anything that seems to have any relation whatsoever to industry, commerce, or utility of any kind. And the best I can get is the festive roof garden, the broad speed-way, and the bounding wave. I wish I were running this universe. I ain't mentioning no names, but there's a certain svelte party on my left, whose initials are J. S., who wouldn't have a monopoly on all the good things in this world."

Schuyler, filling his cigar case from a silver humidor on the sideboard, laughed.

"There's nothing the matter with you, Tom," he said, assuringly, "except that you have too much time and too much money. Stop your kicking."

Blake grinned.

"Let me rave if I want to," he requested. "Let me have a good time. You know as well as I do that I don't mean it, and you know that I'm more glad for your success and happiness and prosperity than I would be for my own; and that's being some glad." He crossed to where Schuyler stood and placed his arm about his shoulders, and continued, "good old Jack. Bully for you. You deserve everything that you have ever won. I'd say I loved you like a brother if it weren't for the fact that I never had a brother yet that I could sit through a meal with without wanting to hit him under the ear with the side-board."

[Illustration: "BYE, LITTLE SWEETHEART"]

The room had become suddenly dark. Came almost without the warning of preliminary rumble—almost without the precursor of sullen flashing—a great peal of heavy thunder. Schuyler turned. Blake sprang to his feet.

Through the bow window, the lawn lay dun and dark. Beyond, the Sound, flat and heavy, seemed as gray oil. The Long Island shore had been swallowed in the gloom. Above all was a great, black cloud, rimmed of silver and of gold, a low cloud, thick and threatening. And yet to one side and the other—in fact save right in its ominous path, one could see the sunlight on water and on land. Then came the rain, and the wind, and with them incessant flashings, incessant bellowings, wild protests of the outraged God of storms. Trees bent and groaned. Flowers, torn from their tender stalks, lay prostrate in puling puddles. And quick-born waves lashed themselves spitefully against the pier and breakwater down beyond the lawn, unseen in the swirling, screaming wildness of it all.

Upon one another Schuyler and Blake turned wondering, amazed eyes. In its suddenness, the storm was unbelievable. They stood, side by side, gazing out into the storm.

Suddenly, into the hand of Schuyler stole tiny, frightened fingers. It was Muriel.

"I'm frightened, daddy dear," she cried.

Schuyler gathered her into his arms.

"Don't be frightened, little sweetheart," he said, soothingly. "It's just a summer storm.... Where's mother?"

"Here, Jack." Her voice came from at his very side. "Isn't it terrible! We can't go in this."

Holding his child close against his breast, her cheeks against his, her gold-brown hair mixing with the gray of his temples, he said:

"Not you and Muriel, of course. But I must. It won't last long; you and Tom can come on a later train. Parks can come with you. There'll be plenty of time. It's only that I have urgent business that I must attend to before sailing."

In a swirl of wind and rain, Parks stepped into the room, and addressing Schuyler, said:

"We should be starting, sir."

Schuyler nodded. The butler was holding his coat in readiness. He thrust his arms within the sleeves and, with a shrug of broad shoulders, stood prepared for departure.

Lifting the little girl that was his own, and of the woman he loved, he held her for a brief moment tight to his breast. In her little ear he whispered:

"Bye, little sweetheart."

She clung to him, little hands about his neck.... He set her down again upon the floor. She ran to Blake, waiting.

The deep lids of Kathryn were half veiling the violet eyes—eyes moist, and very soft. There was a little tremor of the sensitive lips. Schuyler drew her to him, so that she faced him, and whispered:

"Au revoir, big sweetheart.... Don't you dare to cry.... I know how it hurts; but be a brave little woman.... I'll make my stay just as short as possible."

"You'll cable?" she asked, tremulously.

"Cable?" he repeated. "I'll keep that wireless snapping all the way across.... Now let me see you smile."

She tried. It was a wan, sad little smile—a smile that was close of kin to a tear. She clung to him for a moment; then her fingers loosened their hold; she stepped back, white teeth holding nether lip. It was bitterly hard.

He looked; and with more understanding than many a man might have, turned swiftly.

Parks stepped forward.

"Shan't I go with you?" he asked.

Schuyler shook his head.

"No," he returned. "Come with Mrs. Schuyler—meet me at the boat. I'm going alone."

He thrust open the door. Came a wail of wind, a swirl of rain; and then, as he crossed the threshold, the very heaven itself seemed to be reft apart with a great, wild flash of lightning—the roar of the thunder was appalling.

Schuyler started back. He forced a laugh.

"Were I a superstitious man," he remarked, "I might take that for an omen."

And then he was gone.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

YOUNG PARMALEE—AND THE WOMAN.

He came slinking down the deck of the liner, furtive of eye, uneven of tread. A young man he was—and yet old; for while his body told of youth, his face bespoke age—the unnatural forced age—the hot-housed growth of they who live in the froth of life—in the froth that it is hard to tell from the scum.

He was tall, and well-set-up. His clothes hung well about his body; they were of fine texture and make, yet unpressed, uncared for. He had been handsome; but he was no longer; for the eyes looked

forth from hollows in his face. His cheeks were sunken. His lips were leaden. He was unshaven, ungroomed, unkempt.

Looking nervously, this way and that, he made his way among the jostling throngs to one of the passages. Searching with sunken eyes for a numbered door, he knocked upon it with the knuckles of his left hand; his right rested at his side, covered with a handkerchief of white silk.... He knocked; and stepped back, quickly. There was no answer; the door remained shut. He stepped forward again, thrusting the door wide open. The stateroom was empty. He turned. Out upon the deck he strode; then, starting back, he concealed himself in the passageway that he had just left.

Coming down the deck was a woman, a woman darkly beautiful, tall, lithe, sinuous. Great masses of dead black hair were coiled about her head. Her cheeks were white; her lips very red. Eyes heavy lidded looked out in cold, inscrutable hauteur upon the confusion about her. She wore a gown that clung to her perfectly-modelled figure—that seemed almost a part of her being. She carried, in her left arm, a great cluster of crimson roses.

Down the deck she came, slowly, as a queen going to her throne. She turned....

The man hiding in the passageway confronted her. His eyes were burning as of a fever; his whole body shook.... She remained calm, cold, unmoved.

At length, the woman spoke, half smiling:

"You? ... I thought that we were through."

His voice was tense, strained, unnaturally pitched. The words came between clenched teeth.

"You did, eh? You thought you'd throw me over, as you did Rogers, and Van Dam, and the rest of them.... But it won't work—you Vampire!"

Swiftly, he tore from his right hand, the handkerchief that covered it. There was in it a revolver. The bright mouth of the weapon sprang to the white forehead of The Woman.

Yet she did not start—she made no sound, no movement. The smile still dwelt upon her lips. It was only in the eyes that a difference came—in the black, inscrutable eyes. They gleamed now, heavy-lidded as before. Their gaze was fixed straight into the sunken, hate-lit eyes of the man before her, a man who, but for her, might still have been a boy. She bent forward a little.... Her forehead, between the eyes, was now touching the bright muzzle of the weapon. The finger on the trigger trembled—trembled but did not pull.

Came slowly, sibilantly, from between the smiling red lips:

"Kiss me, My Fool!"

Her eyes still fixed him.... The hand holding the revolver trembled more violently. Slowly the mouth of the weapon sank to lips—to chin—to breast.... It hovered there a moment, just over the heart—the finger twitched a little—twitched but did not pull. It was a finger governed by a vanished will in a shrivelled brain.

Then, suddenly, the revolver leaped—the finger pulled. With a shrill screech of hopeless, hideous imprecation, a shriek that died still-born, the bullet pierced flesh and bone and brain; and that which had been a man that should have been a boy, lurched drunkenly and lay a crumpled nothing upon the deck. There was blood upon the deck—beside the hem of the crimson gown, near to the crimson heel of her shoe. And the gown was caught beneath the body of the boy that was.

She looked down upon him. The smile not even yet had left her lips. With a lithe movement, infinitely graceful, she drew away, disengaging the hem of her crimson garment.... A crimson petal from the great cluster in her arms fell upon it, to lie upon the hollow whiteness of the upturned cheek.... And that was all.

A man—a man that should have been a boy—was gone.... Hurrying, horror-ridden passengers found him there, alone. The doctor came, and stewards, and the captain. They lifted him, and bore him away. Of those who live in the froth of things—the froth that is often the scum—there were several. One of these knew him.

"It's Young Parmalee," he informed them.

And that was all he knew; that, and possibly some other things that are little. But of the great things, he knew nothing. For of these great things, God has told us but little.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER FIFTEEN.

A WARNING.

The storm that had come hissing across the Sound did not last long. Its very fierceness, it seemed, was its own undoing. Its frenzy soon passed. And anon the sun shone; the drooping flowers raised to it pitiful, bedraggled little faces; and from the fields, rose the burden of incense, moist, fragrant giving wet thanks of its coming and of its going.

Schuyler's farewells had been but tentative. It had been understood that, should the storm abate, Mrs. Schuyler, Muriel and Blake would follow on the next train; for he himself was forced by the exigency of his mission to reach the city at least two hours before sailing time.

The car, returning from the trip to the depot, was again called into service. Parks, as well, had waited, and went with them.

Reaching the city, Blake's machine, for which he had telephoned from Larchmont, was waiting; and in this they made the journey through the traffic-thronged New York streets, to the dock; a route that leads one from wealth to poverty, from respectability to license, from well-doing to ill-doing, and through all that lies between.

The dock, beside which lay tugging at her cables the huge liner, was confusion thrice confused. Jolting cabs, rattling taxis, smooth-running private cars, drays and vans, added to the tumult caused by the hundred— the thousands—of hurrying, scurrying humanity. Came the calls of excited passengers, the rumbling of trucks, the Babel-like voices of emigrants; and, beyond, the noises of the Great River.

Alighting from the car at the gangway, they boarded the ship, with its crowded decks. Schuyler's stateroom was aft, in the center of the ship. It lay the first door to the right, as one enters the narrow passageway. To it the little party made its way.

The door of the room opposite was ajar. Blake noticed that there lay therein a great mass of crimson roses; scattered amid the toilet articles and accessories of a woman. Passing through the crowds of the deck, he had heard, also, The Man Who Knew telling another man, who did not know of Young Parmalee. It had been but a word. But it had been a word that had found fructification and meaning in the sight of a deck steward, with a bucket, mopping up something from the deck, just outside the little passageway.

Kathryn and Muriel, seen safely to the room that Schuyler was to occupy, Blake returned and made his way out upon the deck. He stood for a moment by the steward, watching him.

Then very quietly inquired:

"Where did it happen, Steward?"

The steward, wringing out the mop into the dark water of his bucket, looked up. There were beads of sweat upon his bronzed, wrinkled brow. Yet the day was not warm.

"Wot, sir?" he queried.

"Where did it happen?"

"Wot happen sir?"

"Young Parmalee's suicide." Blake spoke quietly, calmly.

The steward's eyes shifted.

"Suicide, sir?" he said. "Don't know nothink about it, gov'ner."

Blake pointed to the spot upon the deck.

"What's that, then?" he demanded.

The steward moved, uneasily.

"A spot I just be'n a-cleanin' of, gov'ner."

Blake pointed to the bucket.

"And that?" he persisted.

"Water, sir."

"And—?"

The steward slowly drew the back of his hand across dry lips. And then, in a swift rush of strangled words:

"Blood, gov'ner. Blood.... Only a boy he was, sir, and she looked down on him, laying there with his brains spattered on the deck and she laughed, sir.... God, sir! She laughed...." He struggled to his feet and pulled his forelock. He said in altered tones: "Beg pardon, sir. But a man can't be a blime machine all the time, sir."

There came a call from the state-room.

"Get that bucket away from here. Quick!" And Blake turned to meet the wife and child of his friend, as they came from the state-room.

"Oh, I do hope Jack won't be late," Kathryn remarked, scanning the decks.

Blake standing between her and the steward, returned with forced lightness:

"Oh, he has plenty of time. Half an hour at least. Why, once I lost fifty thousand in the market, broke my steering gear running over a fat policeman, was arrested, taken to court and bailed out and all within twenty minutes. Jack's got time to squander."

There was sadness in the violet eyes.

"It will be very lonely when he's gone—very lonely," she mused, slowly.

"Well, it will be as lonely for him as it will for you," Blake returned; "which is a doubtful consolation, but one that most women don't have."

Muriel had wandered to the rail.

"Oh, I see him!" she cried, suddenly. "There he is! Daddy! Daddy, dear! ... He's right there on the gangway—right behind that fat lady—the one with the red nose. I'm going to meet him."

Sturdy little legs started to follow the summons of impulsive little brain. But her mother detained her.

"No, dearie," she objected. "You'll get lost He'll be here in a moment, now."

"Not unless he can get by that lady," protested the child. "He's—he's—"

"Pocketed is the word you want, Muriel," assisted Blake. He was looking in the direction which the child had indicated. Suddenly, he exclaimed:

"I see him now. He doesn't see us, though. Possibly he doesn't know where his stateroom is. These boats are very confusing. I'll go fetch him."

Blake disappeared in the throngs upon the deck. Muriel turned to her mother.

"Mother," she implored.

"Yes, dear?"

"Why can't we go, too, mother dear?"

"We must stay to care for Aunt Elinor."

"But she has a doctor and two nurses now," protested the child.

"But," returned her mother, smiling, "that isn't like one's own family."

The child was for a moment sunk deep in thought most serious.

"But why must both of us stay?" she asked, at length. Then, suddenly:

"Mother, dear!"

"Yes little sweetheart?"

"I'll match you to see which one of us goes!"

Mrs. Schuyler, surprised, smiled.

"Why, daughter! Wherever did you learn that?"

"I heard Mr. Tom and daddy the other night. They were sitting in the library, and Mr. Tom said, 'I'll match you to see who gets the cigars.' So, mother dear, I thought that you and I might match one another to see which of us could go with daddy."

Kathryn placed an arm about her, drawing her to her.

"Do you want to go with daddy—and leave mother?" she asked.

The child shook her head, doubtfully.

"No," she said, "not exactly.... I want to go with daddy. I love daddy. But I want to stay with you, too, mother dear.... Mother dear," she added suddenly.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Wouldn't it be nice if we were both twins! Then half of us could go with daddy, and the other half of us stay at home with Aunt Elinor."

[Illustration]

CHAPTER SIXTEEN.

THE BEGINNING.

Schuyler came hurrying down the deck, Blake and Parks close behind. There was on his face the smile of great gladness. He placed one strong arm about his wife, the other about his child.

"I've some bully news for you, Kate, dear! The President has so arranged that I can complete my work and get back to you in less than a month. Isn't that splendid? Just one little month and I'll be back again with you and baby."

The child raised her head in protest.

"But I'm not a baby, now. I'm six years old. Mother has to pay full fare for me on the cars. Don't you, mother?"

Schuyler picked her up from the deck, tossing her in the air.

"No matter what you may be to conductors, you'll always be baby to daddy, you little darling," he said, brightly. Then, turning to Blake, with lightness born of great earnestness:

"Take good care of them while I'm gone, won't you, old man. By Jove, I'd like to chuck it all, even at the last minute as it is, and stay at home—"

Facing his wife, child and friend, his eyes were up the broad deck. Came toward him The Woman—The Woman known of The Man Who Knew, and of Young Parmalee. Schuyler's voice died in his throat. Her eyes were upon him. His eyes were upon her. She made no movement. She paused not in her indolent, sinuous walk. Her eyes were upon him; and that was all—dark eyes, glowing, inscrutable, beautiful with the beauty that was hers. And his eyes were on hers.... She turned up the narrow passageway in which lay Schuyler's stateroom.... Blake saw, too. He was not of those who live in the froth of things—that froth of things that is the scum. But he was of the world; and they who are of the world have knowledge of all that that world contains—of all, that is, that it is for such as they to know.

Kathryn looked up, at length, anxiously. Schuyler was never abstracted. She prompted:

"You were saying, Jack, dear—"

Schuyler drew his hand, palm out, across his forehead.

"Why—oh, yes," he floundered, trying to marshal his scattered thoughts. "I was saying—" He appealed to Blake, half-helplessly, half-whimsically. "By Jove, that's strange. What was I saying, Tom?"

Blake replied, shortly:

"You were asking me to take good care of them."

Schuyler nodded.

"Oh, yes," he assented. And then; "I don't understand. I—but you will take good care of them, won't you, old man? They're all I have; and more, they're all I want. Guard them, Tom, for me as though they were your own."

* * * * *

Waiting to take farewell of those one loves is indeed a sweetness tinged with bitterness. And if one loves very, very much, it is sometimes a bitterness tinged with sweetness. Kathryn, lower lip clenched between white teeth, herself unhappy would have kept that unhappiness as far as possible hers alone. There were those on board that she knew. To them she went; for there was still, since time was short, too much of it. Muriel she took with her.

Schuyler, in his eyes all the virile love that such as he feel for theirs, watched her vanish amid the throngs. Then, sauntering to the rail, leaned against it.... There came into his eyes a look of abstraction, of aberration, of puzzlement. Blake stood watching him— stood for a long time, silent, unmoving.... At length he moved to Schuyler's side.

"Old man," he said, very slowly, very quietly, very earnestly; "old man, what's up?"

Schuyler turned, quickly

"What's up?" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

Blake said, still slowly:

"There's something happened to you."

"Happened," cried Schuyler. "Something happened?" He laughed. "What could have happened?"

"Damned if I know. But something has. I've got a hunch."

Schuyler answered, lightly:

"Well, you'd better take it to a doctor and have it diagnosed." He half turned. "It's only my natural nervousness at leaving Kathryn and Muriel— and the importance of my mission. By the way," he asked, abruptly, "what was that crowd doing on the dock as I came up?"

Blake, selecting a cigarette, lighted it.

"Suicide," he said, curtly.

Schuyler started.

"You say it mighty cold-bloodedly," he asserted. "Where did it happen?"

"Here, I believe. Almost where we are standing."

"Good God! Who was it?"

"Young chap, named Parmalee."

"What? The boy who's been in the papers so much lately—who disgraced himself, and his people, for a woman?"

Blake nodded, and continued:

"Did you happen to notice the woman who passed a moment ago—the one carrying the red roses?"

Schuyler bent his head.

"I noticed her," he replied, slowly. "What of her?"

"The woman."

"You don't mean Parmalee—?"

"Yes, I do."

"Because his love was not returned?"

"Because," replied Blake, smiling mirthlessly "it *was* returned.... Did you ever read that! thing of Kipling's, *The Vampire*?"

"Why, yes, of course," returned Schuyler. "Almost everyone's read that."

"Do you remember how it goes?" persisted Blake.

Schuyler thought a moment. Then, slowly, he recited:

"A fool there was, and he made his prayer,
(Even as you and I)

To a rag and a bone and a hank of hair.
We called her the woman who did not care.
But the fool, he called her his Lady Fair—"

He broke off, abruptly. "A weird thing," he said, as though to himself. "I never thought much about what it meant before...." He turned, abruptly. "Why did you ask me if I'd read it?" he demanded.

"Well," said Blake, flicking the ashes from his cigarette, "there's the fool," he nodded toward the drying spot upon the deck. "And there," he indicated, with a backward toss of his well-shaped head, the corridor down which had passed the woman, "is his lady fair. I've even heard," he went on, "that she used to call him her 'fool,' quoting the poem. Pretty little conceit, eh?" His jaw, firm, square, set tight. Then, with a touch of deeper feeling. "She murdered that boy just as surely as if she had cut his throat; and the worst of it is that she can't be held legally guilty—morally, yes, guilty as sin; but legally—" He shook his head. "The laws that man makes for mankind are a joke."

"As sometimes seem," added Schuyler, slowly, "the laws that God makes for mankind.... If what you say about that woman be true, she ought to be taken by the hair of the head and dragged through the hell she has built for others." His brows were knitted; he was gazing with unseeing eyes upon the bustle and confusion of the dock below.

Blake, eyeing him, remarked quietly, but in tones more light:

"However, that's not your job, nor mine, thank God. It would be an eminently suitable recreation for a debonair young man with a shattered reputation, a cast iron stomach, several millions of dollars and no objections to staying up by the year." He turned a little, toward Schuyler. "What are you thinking about?" he queried.

"Only the fool."

"The generic fool of Kipling, or Young Parmalee?"

"I was thinking of Young Parmalee, then."

"And the woman?"

Schuyler quoted, slowly:

"A fool there was—"

"Oh, but," Blake protested, "I wouldn't call him a fool."

"Why not?" demanded Schuyler. "He was a fool."

"Yes," returned Blake. "But he's dead, now."

"Bosh," retorted Schuyler, impatiently. "I've no sympathy with that false sentiment that forbids one to speak the unpleasant truth of a dead person. If a man were a fool while alive, his dying doesn't absolve him of his folly. Young Parmalee's death was a mitigating circumstance, however. He killed himself; which shows that he had some manhood left. But he should have had the decency to choose another place for his self destruction." He was silent for a moment; at length he went on: "A man is what he is, and he was what he was. His dying can change nothing of his living."

He looked up. His wife and child were coming toward him.

"Say nothing to them about all this, Tom," he urged.

"Certainly not," acquiesced Blake.

A steward came down the deck, calling raucously:

"All ashore that's going ashore!"

Kathryn turned to Schuyler.

"And now that the time has really come to say good-bye," she said, brokenly, "here's something I brought you, Jack."

She handed him a little box of glazed cardboard. Wonderingly he took it.

"For me?" he cried, with simulated gaiety. "That's sweet of you, dear heart—sweeter, even than are these." For he had opened it, and taken forth the tiny bouquet of forget-me-nots that had nestled in the depths of the moist cotton, "and these are sweetness itself. But why forget-me-nots! As though I could ever forget you, even for one little minute!"

There came again the strident call:

"All ashore that's going ashor-r-r-r-r-r-r-e!!!"

Violet eyes suffused, Kathryn was clinging to him.

"Jack," she whispered. "Jack, I'm afraid I'm—going—to—cry."

With infinite tenderness he held her to him.

"There, there, sweetheart mine," he said, soothingly. "Don't be a silly.... Now we'll all go down to the gangway, where the big hugs are.... Then I'll rush back here and we can wave one another good-bye and try to imagine I'm going only over to Staten Island for the afternoon."

Came farewells at the gangway—farewells of tears, of heart-aches, of quivering lips and moist lids—of laughter quavering and smiles unreal—of the good hand clasp that good men know—the touch of wet, clinging lips.

Schuyler came rushing down the deck, keeping to that part of the ship that lay nearest to the dock. From the bouquet that had been given him, he plucked tiny, fragrant blossoms, casting them to those that had given, and with them sending cheery word of hope, tender word of parting.

He could see them there, far below, straining against the ropes, waving to him. He could see the violet eyes, tear laden, the lithe, slender, figure of his wife in the glory of her perfect womanhood—the sturdy little body of his child, barelegged, browned, hair tumbled, waving frantically a tiny little square of muslin and shouting farewells at the highest pitch of childish treble. He could see his friend—the friend such as few men may ever have, and, having, may pray to hold—broad shoulders protecting wife and child from the pressing throngs—he could hear his voice booming through all the heterogeneous medley of sound.

His voice choked. Words that he was crying—words lost in all the confusion of sound and movement—stuck in his throat. Moisture came to his eyes.... He turned a little.... Came into range of his vision a tiny streak of shifting crimson. He looked.

She was sitting there, on the deck—she—The Woman. She lay back in her chair, long, lithe limbs covered with a rug of crimson and black and dull, dull green. She was dangling gently, sensuously, the great cluster of scarlet roses that she held, now and again bringing them to where their fragrance would reach her delicately-chiseled nose, imperious, haughty.... They looked startlingly red against her cheek—like blood upon the snow.... She was looking at him.... There was no movement, save the even, languorous swing of the crimson blossoms. Lips, vivid red, were motionless, half parted in a little, inscrutable smile.... She was looking at him.... He forgot.... The whistle had been blowing, sounding departure. He had not heard. There was a lull. From afar, shrill, childish voice brought a drifting, "Bye, bye, daddy, dear!" ... He did not hear.... Her eyes were on his. His eyes were on hers.... And seemed to be nothing else....

[Illustration]

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.

IN THE NIGHT.

He had told Parks to come to him as soon as they were under way. There were certain letters that he wished to get off in time to send them back on the pilot boat. Parks found him by the rail, gazing at a tall, darkly- beautiful woman reclining in a steamer chair, eyes only visible above a great cluster of crimson blossoms. Parks had spoken to him three times before there was forthcoming a reply. Then, slowly, as a man awakening from a heavy sleep, Schuyler had gone with him to his room.

He had tried to dictate his correspondence; had tried, and failed. There were many mistakes. His thoughts would not seem to coalesce. His mind was not upon what he was doing, nor could he place it there. And Schuyler's was a brain that had always been to him an admirably trained servant, coming when he willed it, doing what he willed and in the way he willed.... But today it was a servant sullen, rebellious, recalcitrant. ... The letters remained unwritten. Nothing was sent back with the pilot. And Parks, wondering, puzzled—and, perhaps, a bit perturbed— watched the pilot swing down the Jacob's ladder, and make across the water toward his craft, with wonderment, puzzlement, perturbation no bit abated.

Schuyler paced the deck all that day. Lunch he did not touch. Dinner found him undesirous of food. He was walking—walking—striding up and down, up and down—deep in thought, it seemed—and yet he had not been able to dictate his letters. Parks wondered yet more. At length he went to his employer and asked him if he were not needed. The answer was curt; it was "no." And never before had Parks been answered without a cordial nod, or, perhaps, the good smile of good-fellowship.... He could not understand.

And Schuyler? His brain was in a tumult. Like us all, there were many things that he did not know—there were many things that he did not even know there were to know.... Some of these he was beginning to learn. It had shaken him—it was shaking him—to his soul.

He did not see The Woman again that day.... Her room was across the corridor from his. He heard her voice, directing the steward to bring to her her dinner....

It was dark that night—dark as night seldom gets in the northern latitudes, in June. The lights of the deck looked like vigorous glowworms. The stars seemed very far away. Far below, as he paced, he could see dimly a great blackness that was the sea, and against it the white of the waves as they broke sullenly against the huge hull.... Later it became yet more black. The stars vanished.... The ship seemed a world of its own, hurling through an eternity of utter, deadly space. A wind sprang up, a wind from the East, wet and vicious, a wind that spat upon one, that chilled one, that slapped one with clammy fingers.

Schuyler paced the deck. Coming out of the dim half light of the promenade into the corner of the rail, by the bow, he thought he saw her. He was not sure at first.... Then, though his eyes pierced no more clearly, he was sure.... He went closer. She stood there, white hands clasping the bare rail, lithe, sinewy, lazy body, tilted a bit backward as though in the grasp of the spitting wind. Her throat was bare to it, and her breast. Her lips were parted. Her eyes were deep lidded. Her head was poised like a tiger lily upon its stalk.... He stood there, enveloped in the blackness.... For a long time she stood motionless. Then she stretched her white arms above her head, stretched the long muscles of her body, as a panther stretches. She was very, very beautiful.... He stood watching.... The ship lurched. It reeled against a huge wave, shivering it into roaring spume. The wet fingers of the wind had wrapped her garments about her, every fold tight against her rounded body. She stood, arms above her head, lips parted, silhouetted against the foam.... The ship reeled again, and there came darkness utter.... When again there was light so that one might see, Schuyler stood alone.

Six bells had struck ere he went to his room. Then, scourged of body, scourged of soul, wracked, harassed, torn, he sought his berth. But he did not sleep. He thought of Parmalee, the boy who was a man. He thought of The Woman. He thought of himself. He thought of the wife that he loved. He thought of the child that he loved—the child that had come to him through that wife. He thought of all these things, and of many more; and he did not understand; he did not know. For God has shown even the wisest of us but little of this world in which we live.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.

WHITE ROSES.

It was two months later. In the little garden that lay on the side of the big, rambling house at Larchmont where the sun best loved to dwell, roses were in bloom; and roses, even as the sun, seemed to love that garden. They clustered, great masses of glowing white, against the latticed arbor—they caught playfully at one's hat as one would walk through the gate that led to the broad green lawn, and to the Sound beyond—they snatched at one's clothing as one would walk past the largest bush—the one that stretched its branches across the French window. It was a real garden—an out-of-door home—a garden in which one might live, and in which one might be glad that one was alive.

At one side of a tiny writing table set upon the thick, carpet-like sward, sat the mother, pen in hand, before her a half-finished letter. Across from her the child pressed strong white teeth into the yielding wood of her pencil; and before her, too, was a half-written letter—a sprawling, uncertain letter of childhood.

At length the child looked up. She could see that her mother was not writing; so if she spoke, she would not be interrupting.

"Mother, dear?"

"Yes, honey?"

"How do you spell love?"

"Don't you know, dearie?"

The child shook her head.

"L," prompted the mother.

Muriel ventured, dubiously:

"L-a-?"

Her mother shook her head. The child ventured again:

"L-i-?"

"No, honey."

The child kicked her brown little legs.

"Tell me, mother dear," she besought. "Please tell me."

"L-o-v-e," spelled the mother.

"Oh, yes! I 'member now.... Mother, dear?"

"Yes, little sweetheart?"

"When is a daddy coming home? It's awfully hard to write letters. He's been gone a long time now, hasn't he, mother dear?"

"Yes, dearie.... A long, long time." The violet eyes were sad.

"Most a year?" persisted the little one.

Her mother smiled a little, wanly.

"It seems like it, doesn't it?" she said. "But it's only two months—not only two months," she corrected; "but two months."

Came a little pause. It was broken again by Muriel.

"Mother, dear."

"Yes?"

"Can't I make the rest just kisses?"

With a smile—a smile of infinite love and tenderness, the mother leaned across and kissed the child that was hers.

"Of course you may, dearie," she assented, softly.

"Why don't you write kisses, too, mother, dear?" queried the little one. "It's lots easier.... Oh, mother, dear! I'll tell you what I wrote if you'll tell me what you wrote. Will you?"

Violet eyes gave loving assent.

"Oh, goody! We won't tell anyone else, will we?"

"No, dearie."

"Then," declared Muriel, "I'll read mine."

She picked up the wrinkled little sheet of sadly irregular chirography.

"Dear father daddy," she read. "It rained yesterday. Mother and I are well. We hope you are well and God gave our new cat four kittens." She looked up into the face of her mother. "God is awfully good to cats, isn't He, mother dear?" she asked. She went on, then, with the assurance of childhood: "Please come home. We miss you. I fell in the lake yesterday, but didn't take cold. I love you.... And the rest is just kisses."

She eyed her mother anxiously.

"Do you think daddy will like that letter?" she asked.

Her mother's voice was a bit uneven as she answered.

"I'm sure he will, little sweetheart I'm *sure* he will."

"Now," requested the child, "you read yours."

Kathryn, drawing the child to her, bent forward. There was much in her heart—much that she might not tell to anyone of all the world save two— and one of these was far away; and, even though the other could not understand, still—

She read:

"My John: You know how we love you, but you don't know how we miss you. Please, please come back to us. If it weren't for Muriel I don't know what I'd do, John, dear. I don't want to make you unhappy. I want you to have all the honors—all the prominence—everything that a man's heart holds dear. But I can't help being jealous a little of the things that are keeping you from us...."

She ceased, turning her head away. A robin, in the roses, lifting its head, broke into song. The child waited, patiently.... At length she inquired:

"Is that all, mother dear?"

Kathryn nodded. "Yes, honey."

"Haven't you made any kisses?"

"No, dearie."

"But," protested the child, "daddy'll be so disappointed!"

"Will he, honey? That wouldn't do, would it? ... Very well, then, mother'll make some kisses."

With Muriel looking on, the mother made several large, and heavy crosses at the foot of that which she had written. There were other marks on that letter—marks that were not kisses—marks that had been made by moisture, and that had smeared the ink as they had been quickly wiped away.

These the child did not notice; she was looking toward the house.

"Here comes Aunt Elinor, mother, dear," she said.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER NINETEEN.

SHADOWS.

Mrs. VanVorst had been very ill. A fever, contracted in South Africa where she had been with her husband—a fever gained in a futile effort to save the life of that husband, had sadly fagged a naturally vigorous constitution. There had been a recurrence soon after her return to America. Now she was in that condition of indolent convalescence that is in women so interesting, in men so uninteresting.

She was an out-of-door woman, tall, lithe, willowy. In the rugged health that was normally hers, she seemed muscled almost like one of the opposite sex; yet she lost by it none of the charm of frank femininity that was hers. She was long-limbed, clean-limbed, quick of mind and of body.... The forced inaction of illness was irksome to her. It was hard for her to walk slowly; it was hard for her to sit in silent inaction—to lie in indolent unrest. Too, she felt more than anyone save herself might ever know the loss of the man that had been to her not only husband but as well friend, companion and comrade.

She had been of the world, though anything but worldly. She knew perhaps, more than many another of the Hidden Things.

She strolled forward through the sun-flecked garden. A magazine, its leaves still uncut, was in her hand. She sank into a chair, in a spot from which she might see the Sound and its burden of sails.

"Tom come yet?" she asked.

Kathryn shook her head.

"Not yet."

"Heard from Jack to-day?"

Again Kathryn made negation.

"The foreign mail hasn't come yet," she said. "I told Pierre to stop at the office for it."

Elinor, selecting a paper knife, ran it slowly between the pages of her magazine.

"That business of his seems to be keeping him a long time," was her comment. "What did he say in his last letter?"

"Why, there are several matters of great importance that still remain unsettled. It's not a little thing, his mission, you know. I don't know much about such things; but diplomatic questions, it always seemed to me, take years and years of all manner of serious discussion, and weighty argument."

Kathryn tried to speak lightly; yet the heaviness of her heart was pitifully apparent. Elinor was scanning a colored frontispiece—a thing of vivid yellows and brilliant blues.

"You're feeling almost like yourself again, aren't you, Nell?"

Elinor nodded.

"Yes," she replied. "Thanks to you."

"You were very ill."

"One more doctor would have finished me."

Of a sudden, there came from the drive the quick honking of an automobile horn, together with the soft purring of an engine. Muriel leaped to her feet; brown little legs flashed as she made her way across the garden.

Kathryn and Elinor watched her going. They heard her cry, "Oh, Mr. Tom!" Another moment and Blake, carrying the child in his arms, thrust aside the bending heads of the white roses and made his way into the garden.

"Hello, folks," was his greeting. "Is God in?"

"Who?" demanded Elinor.

"God," he returned. "This is heaven, isn't it? It certainly does seem like it to anyone who has just come from the fireless cooker that sometimes rejoices under the name of Manhattan. My old Aunt Maria! But it is hot there, though."

"We're very glad to see you, Tom," Kathryn began; "although we do owe you a scolding."

"What for?" he demanded, setting the child to the sward and taking off his hat.

"You haven't been near us for a fortnight."

He seated himself, mopping his forehead.

"Business, Kate. Business," he declared, importantly.

Elinor laughed in pleasant irony.

"Business!" she repeated.

"I said, 'business,'" he retorted.

"Yes," she rejoined; "but you can't prove it."

"Can't eh?" he inquired. "Well, you go back to the wicked metropolis and you'll find that my rent is paid and that a coupon's been cut from one of my bonds. And who did it, I'd like to know?"

"Oh, your secretary, or the janitor, or somebody," returned Elinor, easily. "Not you."

Tom laughed.

"I must have a very negligible reputation for industry in this menage. How do you think I spend all my time?"

Elinor, arms akimbo, half faced him.

"Well, Mr. Bones," she asked. "How do you spend all your time?"

He grinned at her, friendlily.

"Feeling better, aren't you?"

"I feel so well," she returned, "that if this doctor of mine weren't such a Simon Legree, I could play you eighteen holes of golf for a box of gloves against a box of cigars."

"Gambler!" he scoffed. "And if I should win, I suppose I'd have to smoke the cigars."

"Certainly," she countered, easily, "if I should have to wear the gloves."

He sank back in the big chair.

"Well," he asserted, "it were useless to speculate on that which may never be. I am at present in that interesting state of a man's career where golf doesn't belong. A man who is beyond the first flush of adolescence and not yet in the last pallor of senility, has no business dallying with golf. He's liable to get sunstruck."

Muriel, who had been listening with round, wondering eyes, ran to her mother.

"What does he mean, mother dear?" she asked.

Elinor replied instead, laughing.

"Nobody knows, Muriel. Not even he."

"Now that's unkind, Nell," protested Blake; "unkind though true."

The child, eyeing them for a minute in serious non-understanding, recurred with the facility of the very young to other things.

"Oh, mother dear!" she cried. "We forgot to stick up our letters to daddy."

Taking her mother's hand, she led her to the little table. Elinor, left alone with Blake, turned to him and queried:

"Heard from Jack lately?"

He shook his head.

"Not lately. Not since I've seen you."

"Not enjoying himself much, I suppose," she commented. "He always stuck to this place in summer like a barnacle. Was crazy about it."

Blake, sitting with left fist in right palm, eyes upon the velvety green of the lawn, shook his head, slowly.

"He shouldn't have left a home like this if they'd offered to make him Queen of Sheba," was his comment.

Kathryn had turned to him. There was in her eyes a frank gladness—a sincere welcome. She was glad to see him; how glad, she herself scarcely knew. She had few friends; for there were but few people for whom she really cared. She had known Blake for many, many years—known him and liked him, and liking, had respected. He was of the few men whom money, and bachelorhood, have no power to spoil. And they are few indeed. The one has power to spoil, you know, even as has the other; and both together—unusual indeed is the man who can resist.

"It's good to see you again, Tom," she declared. "It's been lonely here.... And I never thought that would happen."

"It's good to be here," he returned, looking steadily upon her. "It's good to be here, Kate. It's a perfect place, this—perfect."

Elinor had risen; plucking a bending blossom, inhaling of its delicate fragrance, she had wandered through the broad archway of the arbor, toward the Sound.

There was a moment of silence. There came from between Blake's lips a deep sigh.

Kathryn looked up, quickly.

"What's the matter, Tom?"

He shook his head again.

"I don't know. Sometimes things go all wrong—dead wrong—and no one can tell why, or how, or what to do."

"Why, Tom!" she cried. "What do you mean? Has anything—"

"Mean?" he interrupted. "Oh, nothing. Nothing, of course. I—I guess it's loneliness. There are a lot of people who think because I have a motor to smell, a yacht to make my friends seasick and a club window to decorate, that I'm contented with my lot. But at heart I'm the most domestic individual that ever desecrated a dinner coat; and sometimes the natural tendencies of the gregarious male animal will not down. There's too much of the concentrated quintessence of unadulterated happiness lying around here. Maybe that's it."

"We have been happy here, Tom—very, very happy." Then, quickly: "I'm sorry, Tom.... I understand, and I'm sorry."

He smiled.

"It's nothing, Kate," he declared, "nothing at all. You've got to expect a bachelor to kick every once in a while, you know. They're a peevish lot of old guys."

[Illustration]

CHAPTER TWENTY.

A FAIRY STORY.

Toward the child of his friend, and of his friend's wife, Blake felt not as men in his place would have felt. The love that he had for the dainty little thing of gold-brown hair, and gold-brown cheeks, and straight, sturdy little legs was the love of a man for his own. It seemed to him, almost, that she was flesh of his flesh, blood of his blood, bone of his bone. It was the "almost" that hurt; for she was the child of the woman he loved, and of another man....

To love the wife of another man is a bitter thing—a bitter thing. To love with dishonor is not hard; but to love with honor were hard indeed. To go away, so loving, were to render more easy to bear the thing that must be borne. To stay—to see day by day the happiness that lieth beyond hope, were to stand in hell and gaze at heaven. And this were most bitter, most hard, of all. Yet this was what Blake had done. This was what Blake would do; and it was what he expected to keep on doing until there was no such

thing as time and the souls of all men were dead. He did it because all that lay for him in life lay there, even though not the tiniest bit of it could he claim for his own. And he was a man of heart, as well as of head, and honor.

Perhaps it was because he had loved the woman who was the wife of his friend, since the day when she was as her daughter was now; that his love for the little one that was of her transcended all else in his being—all else save the one thing that he never mentioned, not even to himself. SHE had been like that; a dainty, pretty, loving, simple, naive, sturdy, rugged little thing, with wind-blown hair, and sun-tanned cheeks and legs—soft, gentle, infinitely appealing, generous, loving. In the little one that was of her, he saw her again, violet-eyed, glowing with the glorious abundance of vigor, building wondrous castles of blue beach clay, counting the soaring gulls against the soft blue of summer skies, wandering, laughingly, through daisy fields, rolling, a whirling little tumult of lace and ribbons and wildly-waving bare legs down the stacks of fragrant hay. She had been like that. Small wonder that on her child he lavished all the choked tenderness that cried, sometimes, so, so piteously for outlet.

And as for the child—'way, down deep in her little heart, she had builded of the infinity of her love, three sky-reaching heaps, each one bigger, and more wonderful than the other. One of these she gave to her mother; one to her daddy; and one to "Mr. Tom." And she deemed herself not undutiful, nor lacking in filial amity, for so doing.

Kathryn had followed her sister into the house. Left alone with Blake, Muriel ran swiftly to him, bounding to his knee, and clasping around his neck strong little arms.

"Mr. Tom," she cried, "you haven't told me a story for most a year!"

He held her to him.

"Haven't I, little partner?" he inquired, with infinite tenderness. "Well, that's a grave omission, isn't it? I'll tell you one now." As she sank down contentedly in his lap, and settled her outspreading little skirt primly about her: "What shall it be about?"

"A fairy story," she suggested. "A fairy story about a little girl."

He sat for a moment, in thought; at length he began:

"Well, once upon a time, there was a little girl—a fairy princess."

"Was she pretty?"

"Beautiful. Beautiful as she was good, good as she was beautiful. She was a wonderful, wonderful princess. There was a fairy prince, too," he went on, "a handsome, dashing—a prince that everyone loved and admired and honored."

She nodded, seriously.

"Yes," she said. "Go on."

"Now in the part of the country—it was called the Land of the Great Unrest—there lived a gnome who was a friend of the prince and princess. Do you know what a gnome is?"

Little brows were bent deep in mental flagellation. Then, at length, very eruditely, she ventured:

"No'm is when you say no to a lady, isn't it?"

He laughed, a little; then, seriously:

"That's a different kind of a gnome. The kind of a gnome I mean is a fat man, with long, thin legs and a big, round body and a funny face."

"Oh, now I know!" she cried. "There's a picture of one in the book that you gave me for my birthday. Only this one had whiskers and a funny cap— like a cornucopia."

He nodded.

"That's the fellow," he agreed. "That's the kind I mean—only all of them don't have whiskers; and some of them wear yachting caps, or panamas, or most anything.... Well, the prince and the princess loved one another, and they got married."

"That was nice."

"Yes," he added; "for them. But it wasn't for the gnome. You see, the gnome loved the princess, too."

"Did she know it?"

He shook his head. "No one knew it but the gnome," he returned. "And the prince and princess were very happy. Then a little princess came to live with them, and they were happier yet."

"A little princess like me?" she queried, interestedly.

"Very much like you," he assented.

"And what did the gnome do?"

"Why," he replied, "the gnome just went away and lived in a hole in the ground, all alone."

"Didn't he ever come out?"

"Yes; he used to come out sometimes to tell fairy stories to little girls. But he had to go back again, all alone."

She sighed most dismally and said:

"Poor, old gnome."

"Poor, old gnome," he repeated.

"And then—?" she prompted.

"That's all."

"Isn't there any more?"

"No."

She gazed up at him, disappointedly.

"I don't think that's a very nice story," she declared.

"Don't you?" he said; "I'm sorry, little partner. I didn't mean to tell you that story. I—"

He ceased speaking. Elinor was beside him. He rose to his feet, hastily, confused. It was no little thing that he had told; it was a thing that he had never meant to tell. It had come to his lips, as a parable; because of the way he felt toward the child that was not his; because to her it would never have meant anything; and because of the things inside that had struggled for outlet so long. He wondered if she had heard, and hearing, had understood.... He could not tell....

She spoke to Muriel.

"Run in to Mawkins, dear," she instructed. Then, as the child, obedient, scampered from the room, she turned to Blake, thrusting toward him a letter, and concluded:

"Read that."

[Illustration]

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE.

A LETTER.

Blake took the letter. With its taking there came to him a premonition that the things that he had suspected—the things that he had heard—the things that to him were as unbelievable, as utterly absurd, and ridiculous, and impossible, as might be the vainest imaginings of the vainest, had been proven true.

Over the first of the letter, he skipped cursorily.... At length he found John Schuyler's name. The passage relative to the name was brief. He read it, slowly, word by word. Then he handed back the letter to Elinor.

She had seated herself, waiting. One knee was crossed over the other; and over the upper, her hands

were clasped. She was eyeing him keenly, closely, eyes half closed, brows contracted.

To her Blake turned.

"Well?" he interrogated.

"I've known Martha Dale for sixteen years. She, Kathryn, and I were children together.... I think you knew her, too.... She's not the woman to make a charge like that unless it's true."

Blake shrugged his shoulders. A great pain shot through his heart; a great numbness clamped his brain. He had heard things himself. He had seen people who themselves had seen, or thought that they had seen. One man he had knocked down. With two more, his good friends, he had quarreled irrevocably. And in his own soul, something had told him that it was he who was wrong.

He said to Elinor; even as over and over and over he had said to himself:

"There's some mistake. There must be some mistake. It's impossible."

She eyed him shrewdly.

"There's no mistake" she returned. "She talked with him. She saw him with this woman. They were at the same hotel where Martha stayed. And the morning after she came, they left.... There's no mistake."

"But Jack wouldn't do a thing like that," he protested.

"You're a bad liar, Tom. You knew."

"No!" he cried.

"You did. You know you did.... How long have you known this thing and kept it from those who should be told?"

"Who should be told?"

"Kathryn."

"No!"

"But I say yes!" She went on, almost fiercely: "Do you think I'll have my sister—the sister whom I love better than anyone in the whole world—fooled and shamed and disgraced and dishonored by a man like that?"

He raised his hand, protestingly.

"You wouldn't tell her!" he cried.

She nodded, jaw set.

"I would," she declared.

"It would kill her!"

"Nearly; but not quite. She has too much of her father in her for that. And she must know. It is her right."

"And take away her every chance of happiness—and his of redemption."

"Her every chance of happiness is gone; as is his for redemption," she said, bitterly. And then: "He should have thought of these things before he did what he did.... There's one thing to be done, and only one. I shall tell her."

He remarked, slowly:

"The woman's way: To bring suffering where suffering might be spared."

She rounded on him, swiftly.

"The man's way: to stick to the husband, and deceive the wife.... You men have two codes of ethics—a loose, convenient one for yourselves, a tight, uncompromising one for us. There are no two codes of ethics. Right is right, and wrong is wrong; and there can be no compromise. When a man marries a woman, he owes to that woman every bit as much as she owes to him.... Suppose," she went on, tensely, "that it were Kathryn who had done this thing—who had lied and deceived where she had

promised to love and honor. What then? Would you tell the husband, or wouldn't you?"

He considered; and said, slowly, positively:

"I'd lie like the devil."

She whirled about.

"You would?"

"I would."

"Well, I won't. And," she declared, lips tight pressed, jaw tight set, "I shall tell her."

Then from the house came Kathryn, happily, gaily. In her hand there was a letter, a letter with a foreign post-mark, a letter that, from its jagged end, had been torn open, with eager hands.

"A note from Jack!" she cried.

"What does he say?" demanded Elinor, tensely, her lithe fingers interwoven.

"Oh, terribly lonely," returned her sister—"trying so hard to finish his work and get back to us. I'm adding a postscript." She seated herself before the writing table. "Do you two want to send any messages?"

For a moment—for a long, long moment—did Mrs. VanVorst stand, silent, motionless. All that the thing meant that she was about to do, no one knew better than she. She stood, silent, eyes half closed, hands clenched. Blake watched her, shrewdly.

After a long, long time, she took a short step forward.

"Kate," she began. "Kate, dear. I have something to tell you."

[Illustration]

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO.

AGAIN THE FAIRY STORY.

Kathryn, busy at her postscript, did not hear. Blake stepped swiftly forward.

"No!" he whispered. "No!"

Elinor put him aside.

"Kate!" she said again.

Blake stood for a moment, hesitant. Muriel had come from the house. To her he called.

"Come here, little partner."

Obediently, she came running to him. He seated himself, and took her upon his lap.

"Do you remember the story that I told you a little while ago?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Well, there's more to that story. Would you like to hear it?" He did not wait for her answer; he spoke swiftly, surely. Elinor, across the table, eyed him curiously. Kathryn, still writing, was oblivious quite to all that was going on around her.

Blake continued:

"Well, there came a time when the prince had to go a long, long way off. The princess was very sorry to see him go, and so was the little princess; and they cried; but they were brave princesses, so they didn't cry much; they stayed at home and wrote him letters with kisses in them.

"And then,—well, the fairy prince met a witch—a wicked, wicked witch— and she charmed him, and took him away with her. Now the fairy princess had a sister. She was a good woman; and, like all good

women, she was hard-headed. The sister heard about the witch, and she wanted to run right home as fast as she could, and tell all about it. And that would have made the princess cry, and the prince go away and die, all alone."

The lids over the violet eyes were blinking; the lips quivered.

"I want to cry, Mr. Tom," she complained. "That's worse than the other story!"

"Ah, but," went on Blake, hurriedly, "the sister didn't tell. She wasn't hard-headed. She listened to the voice of reason, rather than to that of intuition—"

"What's that word you just said, Mr. Tom?"

"Intuition?"

She nodded.

"Eh—ah," he hesitated, then, "why, intuition is a thing that women use for a brain. And," he continued, "bye and bye the fairy prince managed to get away from the wicked witch that had charmed him, and he came back again to the fairy princess, and the little fairy princess; and though of course he had been very, very bad—very, very wicked—he was forgiven; and they were almost as happy as they had been before he went away.... Do you like that story any better, little partner?"

She was all smiles now. She nodded, brightly.

"Heaps, and heaps, and heaps!" she cried.

"That's good," he said, as he set her down.

Kathryn had raised her head from her writing.

"Fairy story, Tom?" she queried, in the half-attention of preoccupation.

"Yes," he replied.

"Does it end happily?"

Ere he could have replied, her thoughts were again of her letter.

Blake walked slowly to where stood Elinor. She was toying with a hanging blossom of white, fragrant, spreading. Her eyes were moist; her hand trembled.

He asked, very softly:

"Does it end happily, Nell?"

She turned to him. Her lips quivered.

"I hope so," she whispered. "Only God Himself knows how I hope so!" And then she added slowly, "If women were only as loyal to women as men are to men!"

[Illustration]

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE.

AID.

Blake had suspected; but he had refused to believe. Now he knew. And half an hour later, "The Vagrant," under full head of steam, was surging down the Sound with a great, white bone in her teeth and a great, fan-like wake spreading huge rollers from her trim stern.

She anchored off Thirty-Fourth Street. The launch was ready almost as the chain rattled. Blake's big French car was waiting for him at the pier; and, with scant regard for the speed ordinances, it bore him swiftly through the traffic-thronged streets to lower Fifth Avenue, and to the house of Dr. DeLancey.

The passing of the years had made but little change in either the good doctor or his abode. His office looked the same—dry and musty. He looked the same—shrewd and kindly.

"Come in," he said, with the testiness that in him was cordiality concentrated. "Come in. Don't stand

there like a gump stretching my bell-wire all out of shape. Come in. Come in."

Blake entered.

"Well," said the doctor, leading the way into his office. "What's the matter now. Sick? You don't look it. If all my patients were like you and the Schuylers, I'd starve to death." He fumbled with an old-fashioned cedar cigar chest. "Smoke?"

Blake took the cigar, and lighted it.

"Well," said the doctor, again. "For heaven's sake, what's the matter! Have you become suddenly dumb? You have a tongue, haven't you? If you have, for goodness' sake, use it."

Blake answered, slowly:

"Doctor, it's about Jack Schuyler."

The sudden little look of anxiety that sprang to the good old man's eyes showed how much the statement meant to him.

"About Jack Schuyler!" he exclaimed. "What about Jack Schuyler? No harm— he's not ill?"

"Very, very ill, I fear," Blake responded. "I don't understand it at all. I can't comprehend—"

The doctor brought his old fist down upon the scratched top of his old desk.

"Will you stop hemming and hawing and shilly-shallying around and come to the point!" he fairly howled.

"It's about Jack Schuyler," repeated Blake, slowly, "and a woman."

Doctor DeLancey started. He sat erect.

"What!" he cried. "Jack Schuyler and a woman? You're a fool! It's ridiculous—impossible—absurd!"

"That's what I've been telling myself for the past month," rejoined Blake.... "But it's not ridiculous—it's not impossible—it's not absurd. Would to God it were!"

"But Jack Schuyler!" protested the doctor, incredulously. "Why, I've known him since he was born. And I knew his father, and his mother, and his grandfather and his grandmother before him! Damme, I don't believe it. I won't believe it!"

"Neither did I," returned Blake. "Neither would I—until—"

He told the doctor of the letter that had come; and of that which it contained. In silence the doctor listened, and to the end.

There was a pause; Blake continued:

"I don't believe I could do anything. I'd lose my head. I want you to go to him, to see if there isn't something that you can do. I'll pay—"

The doctor leaped from his chair, wagging an old finger in Blake's face.

"Pay!" he yelled. "Pay me for going to Jack Schuyler! You keep your dashed money, my boy. When I want any, I'll ask you for it. D'ye hear me? I'll ask you for it! When does the first boat sail?"

"It sails to-night—in half an hour," returned Blake. "It's the 'Vagrant'.... I'm going, too.... I want to be near at hand.... Good God!" he cried, suddenly. It was almost a wail. "To think of Jack Schuyler— our Jack Schuyler!—like that!"

The doctor came in from the hall whence he had rushed. One arm was in the sleeve of his coat. His hat was over his ear. He was vainly trying to put his left glove on his right hand.

"Well?" he blurted, "what are you standing there for like a bump on a log? Why don't you get started? What's the matter with you, anyhow? Come on!" He turned, and shouted up the stairs: "Mary! Mary! Ma-a-a-ry, I say! I'm going away. Don't know when I'll be back. Ask young Dr. Houghton, across the street, to take care of my patients until I get home. He'll probably kill a lot of 'em; but I can't help that."

And still shouting, still fussing with glove and sleeve, he bumped out the door, and down the steps to the waiting car.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR.

RESCUE.

Blake waited on the yacht, in the harbor of Liverpool. It was hard for him to sit idly by at such a time; but he felt that it was best. There was in his soul a great pity, to be sure—a great grief—a great horror — yet there was there too a great, deep anger, and a wild resentment; for he loved the daughter of Jimmy Blair, you know; and it was not alone that Jack Schuyler was his friend; it was as well that he was her husband, and the father of her child. So he did not trust himself to go, then; for he knew that all that he might do, Dr. DeLancey could do, and more.

Dr. DeLancey went, then, alone. In London he found John Schuyler. He did not announce himself; he bullied and stormed and finally persuaded those who stood between him and his quarry, to let him go unannounced.

He did not knock. Instead he thrust open the door and entered. Schuyler was standing before the grate with its burden of glowing coals. He looked up. He started, rubbing his eyes as one who sees but doesn't believe that which his gaze tells him to be so.

"It's you!" he cried.

Dr. DeLancey nodded.

"Yes," he said, simply. "Jack, I've come to take you home. The yacht's waiting at Liverpool. Tom's boat, you know. Steam's up. So get your hat."

Schuyler raised his hand, protestingly.

"But," he began, "I—"

The doctor cried, explosively:

"Don't you try to argue with me, young man. I've neglected my practice and let everything go to the devil to come over here, and I don't want any of your dashed *buts* thrown at me. You get your hat and coat and you come with me. D'ye hear me?"

"I can't go," said Schuyler.

The doctor brought his flat fist down upon the center table.

"Can't go!" he howled. "In about a split second I'll show you whether you can't or not. You get your hat and coat! Or," he went on, "come without 'em. It's all the same to me. Parks can pack up your things, and come on the 'Transitania,' to-morrow. You're coming now. D'ye hear me? You're coming now—this dashed instant!"

He advanced upon Schuyler, gripping him by the arm. Schuyler stood for a brief moment, doggedly. Then suddenly his head dropped forward upon his breast.

"Very well," he acquiesced, slowly. Suddenly his voice broke. He almost whispered:

"I'm glad you've come, doctor.... I was helpless—utterly helpless."

They took the train within the hour. And the following morning found the "Vagrant" at sea, with John Schuyler on board. Yet it was a different John Schuyler from the one they had known. He had refused to shake hands with either Blake, or the doctor. He did not mention the woman; nor did they. They tried to be toward him as they had always been—as though all that had happened alone in imagination.... He did not sleep; he ate but little; and he drank, some.

Blake was heart-sick—soul-sick. To see the man that he had known and loved as that man was! But Dr. DeLancey assured him:

"It'll take a year or two. But he'll be all right in the end."

And yet even Dr. DeLancey did not feel certain that it was the truth that he spoke.

In crossing, Schuyler spent much time on a long, long letter—a letter that required much rewriting. On landing, he mailed that letter to the daughter of Jimmy Blair.

As, on the pier, he separated from Blake and Dr. DeLancey, in spite of the insistent pleas of the one, and the testy commands of the other, that he come to live with them. He said, only:

"I shall go to a hotel. I shall stay there a fortnight. Don't come to see me. Don't let anyone come to see me. Don't even try to find out where I am. There's one thing, and only one, for me to do. I'm going to try to do it.... Sometime, I hope that I may shake hands with you, Tom. Sometime I want to shake hands with Dr. DeLancey. I want to tell you both all there is in my heart to tell you. But that time is not yet. God bless you for all that you've done for me."

And, white-lipped, moist-eyed, he left them.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE.

THE RETURN.

The library of John Schuyler's town house was a large room, done in dull browns and deep greens. All that good taste and a sufficient purse could do to beautify it—to render it alike pleasing and restful to the eye, comforting and satisfying to the soul, had been done. Carpeting was deep and rich. The walls were panelled of mahogany, and the bookshelves sunk into their dull depths. On either side of the door leading to the hall hung a painting, the one a Turner, the other a Corregio. There was a fireplace—a huge fireplace wherein might lie a four-foot log; above it a mirrored mantel; before it the skin of a jaguar. Across from this, a narrow flight of stairs led to the private apartments of the owner.

It was early fall now. The roses in the garden of the Larchmont place had withered, and fallen. It had been a dun morning, a morning of dull gray.... Schuyler sat at the big, mahogany desk in the center of his library. Papers lay spread upon the table before him. A decanter of cut glass and silver lay there, also.

The Schuyler that had come was different, very, from the Schuyler that had gone. He was still quick, agile, alert; but there was gone from his clean-cut face the expression of cheerful optimism—of confident happiness—of all-spreading good-fellowship. Little wrinkles had gathered at eye-corners—deeper were the lines that ran from nostrils to the ends of his mouth. But these changes one might not have noticed were it not for the eyes. For, from these the light had gone. They were as lamps unlit.

Yet was there one other change apparent; for while before he had concentrated easily upon that which he had to do, now it was with difficulty—almost, even, with impossibility. He paused, often, to pour from the decanter a little brandy into a small glass, and to drink that which he had poured. He rose from his chair, to stride nervously, up and down, up and down. He seated himself only to drink again; he drank again only to rise again; he rose again only to sit again.

He rapped, at length, upon the little bell that lay upon the table. Waited; then rapped again. And his brows creased in petulance.

"Now where the devil is Parks?" he muttered, nervously.

He waited; and drank while waiting. Then rang again the bell.

Even as its mellow note pierced the silence of the room, the door opened, and Parks entered. He crossed to the desk, and laid upon it a bundle of documents that he had brought. At his clear-cut face Schuyler looked.

"Well, here you are at last, eh? Anyone would think that I had sent you to Singapore for those papers instead of merely upstairs."

"I'm very sorry, sir," was Parks' quiet response.

Schuyler took the papers, drawing them to him.

"That's all," he said, curtly. "You may go."

"But—"

"I said you might go."

Parks still hesitated. Schuyler looked at him angrily.

"I merely wished to say," Parks spoke deferentially, even soothingly, and possibly a bit reluctantly, "that there is a lady—"

Schuyler interrupted, quickly.

Parks nodded.

"Yes, sir. The lady."

Schuyler said, eyes closing a little:

"A lady."

"Well, send her—" Then, as Parks started to go: "No, tell her I'm not here."

"Very well, sir."

Again Parks started to leave the room; again Schuyler stopped him.

"Wait. I've changed my mind. I'll see her."

He reached for the decanter of brandy, and poured into one of the glasses an even inch of the amber liquor. He raised the glass to his lips; but set it down again untasted; for Parks had started to speak again.

"Also there's a van here for your wife's—pardon me, for Mrs. Schuyler's furniture and trunks."

Schuyler's brows contracted; there was the slightest suggestion of a quiver at lip-ends. Then, after a long, long pause, he replied:

"Well, let them take all that she selected.... And Parks."

"Yes, sir?"

"I won't see the lady after all."

Parks nodded, and quietly withdrew. Left alone, Schuyler for some moments sat silent and motionless before his desk. But nowadays, he could not sit motionless for long. There was that inside his brain—inside his soul—which would not let him. It kept him moving—moving—moving, without rest, without cessation; even as he had paced the deck of the liner, on that other morning, almost until the day had come to claim again from the night that which was its own.

Of a sudden he rose from his chair. Swift strides took him across the room. Quickly, nervously, he drew back the curtain from the window.... He could see, beneath him in the street, the van that had come for the belongings of his wife—of the woman who had borne him his child—the child which he had not seen since, upon the dock, she had waved him farewell.

John Schuyler had wandered into the Unknown. Unwillingly, knowing full well what he was doing, but powerless to help—powerless to prevent—he had gone.... Sometimes it did not seem real to him. It was a nightmare—a horrid, horrible, awful, grewsome, rotten dream, a dream that brought to his nostrils a stench—to his soul a coldness unutterable—a coldness beside which that of death might seem a grateful warmth.... He would wake sometimes from his dreams, a cold sweat enveloping him like a pall, a scream upon his lips.... And then, again—He did not understand. He could not understand. It was hopeless, utterly, utterly hopeless.... Why should such things be? How could such things be? There was a God, presumably. Presumably, that God was good.... There was no logic in it—no reason in it.... What did it all mean? "Why?" he asked himself, again and again, and yet again. "Why?" ... There had been no answer....

He watched the van load. He watched the heavy horses throw themselves into the traces, as the whip fell across their flanks. He watched the van slowly gather momentum. He watched it rumble heavily down the sodden asphalt.... At length it turned the corner....

John Schuyler swung on his heel. And then he laughed; it was a laugh that, God grant, you may never laugh, nor I!

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX.

THE RED ROSE.

He did not see her enter. He did not hear her enter. Yet he knew that she was there, although he had left her across an ocean.... Another sense, it seemed, there was within him.... He knew that she had crossed the room; that she was leaning, rounded arms all bare, across the back of the great chair, by the window. He did not know; he had not looked; yet he could see her, beautiful, gloriously beautiful in her strange, weird, dark beauty; head poised like a tiger lily upon its stalk; great masses of dead black hair coiled in the disorder that, of her, was order above the low, white forehead; vivid lips parted to reveal the gleam of shining teeth; long, lithe limbs in the easy relaxation that is of the panther, or the leopard.

At length he turned.... She was there. She was as he, unseeing, had seen; as he had known that he should see.... He had ceased to wonder. The Unknown had taught him so much that of the things it had not taught, he had ceased to wonder....

He looked; and looked away. She laughed, a little, lightly. She turned a little, lissomely. He could see the muscles of her straight, slender shape ripple beneath the shimmering black gown.

At length he spoke, roughly, gruffly:

"Well?"

Almost caressingly, she answered:

"Well?"

"So you've come to gaze upon the ruin you have wrought, eh?"

Again she laughed.

"Upon the ruin *we* have wrought, My Fool," she corrected.

"Don't call me that," he muttered. "It hurts. It hurts because it's true."

"Most truths hurt," she remarked, smilingly.

"Now," he mumbled, "yes...." And then: "You're satisfied, I hope. She's gone."

"Gone?" It was a pretty inflection—the rising inflection of great surprise. Her eyes, glowing of merriment, belied her lips.

"Gone," he repeated, doggedly. "Gone, and taken the child—my child—our child—with her."

She glided across to where he sat; she leaned over him.

"And you're sorry, I suppose," she asked, mockingly. "Heart-broken!"

"Yes, by God! I am!" he cried, from the soul.

There came from her lips a peal of merry, musical laughter.

"The man of it! Every man wants two women—one to love, and one to respect; one to caress, the other to honor; one to please himself, the other to please his friends. And you're no different from the rest that I have known."

He looked up at her, eye laden of hate, and scorn.

"The rest that you have known!" he retorted, with bitterness, with meaning.

"The rest that I have known," she returned, evenly, lightly.

"Young Parmalee, and Rogers, and Seward Van Dam—and God knows how many more!"

She laughed.

"Jealous, eh? That is as it should be, My Fool." She laid her hand lightly on his shoulder. Roughly he took it, casting it from him.

"Damn you!" he cried. "Let me alone!"

She drew up, stiffly, but speaking softly, said,

"So?"

"I—I didn't mean it that way," he apologized.

"I wonder if you ever spoke that way to her—the other.... You didn't," came from her slowly.

He shook his head.

"No," he replied.

The Woman seated herself upon the arm of his chair, lithely.

"And do you know why?"

Again he shook his head.

"Because you never loved her as you love me. A man is as rough sometimes to the woman he loves as at other times he is sweet." She plucked a scarlet rose from the great cluster that she wore at her breast, dangling it in one white hand, lazily, sensuously.

"You know well of men, don't you," Schuyler remarked, bitterly,

"Well enough" she replied, lightly. "And that is why, when you said, 'Damn you, let me alone!' that I didn't say, 'Damn you!'" she struck him lightly across the face with the scarlet blossom, "and go." Then, with abrupt transition: "That and because I love you."

He laughed, mirthlessly.

"Because you love me!" he cried, his voice all scorn. "Because you love me! Does love then bring disgrace, and ruin, and dishonor upon the object of its lavishment? Does it? Does it?"

She had sunk upon the floor at his feet. Her legs were drawn beneath her; she poised herself upon her supple white arms, looking up at him.

"Sometimes," she returned, evenly. "Even as it brings joy, and ecstasy and happiness untold.... And it does bring that," she purred, sibilantly. "Doesn't it, My Fool?"

He leaned forward, drawing her to him.

"You know it," he cried.... "You know it!"

She saw beginning to glow in the leaden eyes the light that she alone knew how to kindle.... It pleased her.... It pleased her also to blight it at her will. She laughed. She knew as well how to blight as how to kindle. She knew also how to twist a soul in torment; and how to swirl it to the false heaven of unreal joys. For she, of the Unknown, knew much— more, perhaps, than of the known. She said, laughing janglingly:

"But did you ever think, My Fool, that there are different loves?"

He sunk back into his chair. The eyes again were leaden. His head bent. She leaned forward, taking from a vase on the table a nodding white blossom.

"One love," she went on, "is like the white rose—pallid, pale, wistful, weak—a lifeless thing that lies dead against the hand that holds it— that wearies the eye and chills the soul.... The other love is like the red rose—rich, rare, glowing, glorious—that thrills the heart with the joy of living and quickens the blood in the veins until the very soul cries out in the frenzy of its fragrance—a pulsing, throbbing love of body and soul and heart and head, that rushes upon one like a storm at sea, dashing one hither and thither, impotent in its tearing, tossing grip.... That is our love—the Red Love—and it is sweet, is it not, My Fool?"

She bent over him, watching the light again leap to the heavy eyes as he answered:

"Sweet? Sweet as Paradise—a false Paradise, perhaps; but still Paradise! Those days on the Mediterranean, the sea no bluer than the sky that held it in its sunlit hand—and Venice—Venice, with the great, round moon overhead, and the mysterious semi-darkness all about—the splashing of soft waters there beside us and the silent whisper of the lazy oar—and just you and I—alone amid all the glories—side by side—heart in heart— soul in soul." With a great choking sob: "It was sweet, Lady Fair!

Sweet!"

The Woman continued:

"And there are two roads through life even as there are two roses. The one is a rough road and weary, and on it happiness seldom treads. It is a plodding road, flat and long; and there you walk with stale and barren people, through a stale and barren land, until you come to an ending yet more stale and more barren than are road or people. That is the road of the White Rose. But the Road of the Red Rose! That's different! On the Road of the Red Rose there is laughter and light, and happiness and joy! Flowers bloom; birds sing. There come the soft wash of the sea—the silent whisper of the breeze—the call of Love!"

She rose lithely to her feet. In one hand she held the bending white blossom; in the other the crimson. Suddenly she thrust them toward him, body bent, lips parted, and cried, sibilantly:

"Which rose do you choose, My Fool? Which Road?"

Roughly he struck from her hand the drooping flower of white. That of red was crushed between them as he seized her in his arms and drew her to him.

"The red rose!" he cried. "And the Red Road! And we'll travel to the end, and beyond!"

[Illustration]

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN.

THE RED ROAD.

From across the table she was laughing at him, brightly, merrily— laughing to see the havoc that she had wrought in the soul of a man. He turned to her, almost savagely.

"You do love me, Lady Fair, don't you?" he almost pleaded. "You must love me, knowing as you do all that I have given up for you." He pointed to a heap of carelessly-tossed letters upon desk-top. "Do you see those?" he demanded. "The first from Washington—the President—demanding my resignation. Following that, curt requests that I withdraw from positions of trust that I held. My wife crushed—my child disgraced—my friends gone—! God in heaven! What haven't I given you, Lady Fair!"

"I thank you," she responded, most graciously, bending low, "And I have given you what? Myself. Is that less than a fair exchange?"

"Not if I may keep that self mine, and mine alone, for all time. But may I?"

"Can you doubt it?" she queried, with a lifting of arched brows.

"There was Parmalee—"

"A silly boy. I never cared for him!"

"And Rogers—"

"Interesting—only interesting—and only at first. Then tiresome!"

"And Seward Van Dam."

"Next to you, a man," she cried. "But like you, insanely jealous, and unreasonable."

"And in the end, perhaps," he said slowly, very slowly, "I shall be like him." He sat for a moment, silent. At length he continued: "But if it were to be I, I alone, for all time, could it last—this Red Love of ours? Could it? ... Could it?"

She leaned forward.

"Why not?" she asked, lightly. "Why not?"

Leaden eyes were gazing out into nothingness.

"Age comes," he said. His voice was low, and deep, and dead. "The body withers. The brain grows

dull. The blood becomes thin. The soul gets weary. And the power to live as once we lived is taken from us. We sit white-haired, blue-veined, drinking in the sun through shrivelled pores to drive the chill from our shrunken frames. It will come to you—to me—to all of us. And neither man, nor God may stop it."

There had come to her face an expression as of a great fear. This man who knew so little, was teaching of that little to her, who knew so much.... At length she swept that fear from her, as one might brush aside the ugly web of a sullen spider.... Again she was the woman who did not know the Known, but only the Unknown.

She asked, lightly:

"Why worry over the years to come when the days that are are ours.... There is happiness in the days that are?"

Her voice was very soft. Again dull eyes gleamed; he exclaimed:

"Happiness! I did not dream there could be a happiness like this!"

Her slender arm was about his neck; he could feel the glow of its warmth. Her voice was soothing—infinately soothing, and musical beyond the telling.

"Then keep a-dreaming, My Fool," she purred, softly. It was almost a whisper. "Keep a-dreaming."

"Would to God I could!" he cried, earnestly. "Would to God I could, forever! The memories of a thousand joys are with me always. Love? What is this love? A golden leaf of happiness floating on the summer seas of life. A silver star of utter joy set in the soft heavens of eternity. A dream that is a reality; a reality that is a dream.... But the storm comes upon the sea. Black clouds blot out the stars. And there can be no dream from which there is no awakening."

"Yet," she cajoled, "while the sea smiles—while the star shines—while we dream—there is happiness to pay for all."

"To pay for all, and more!" Again he turned upon her, swiftly. "Yet in the golden aura of that happiness, there always stand three sodden souls pointing stark fingers at me in ghoulish glee.... Parmalee—Rogers— VanDam.... If I thought—if I for one moment thought—that I should be as they, I'd —"

She stopped him, quickly:

"You'd what, My Fool?"

"I'd kill you where you stand!" he replied, savagely.

She laughed, gaily, clapping soft palms.

"That's the way I love you best, My Fool. It shows spirit, and manhood, and good, red blood—red, like our roses!" She plucked from her breast a handful of scarlet petals, casting them above her head. They fell about them both, a glowing shower. She went on: "How for a moment you could have imagined that you love the woman you call wife—a soft, silly, namby-pamby—"

He was on his feet now, fierce, primal, brutal—all the manhood that was left of him straight and rigid.

"Stop!" he commanded. "Don't you dare say one word against her, or by God, I'll—"

She interrupted, rising haughtily before him, and said coldly, incisively:

"You forget yourself. You humiliate yourself. You insult me. I'll say what I please of whom I please."

"You'll keep your tongue off her, and off the little one!"

"I'll not if I choose not!"

"You will!"

She laughed. He stood for a moment, poised in anger. Then the momentary flash of righteous wrath was gone. He turned, slowly, from her.

She remarked, lightly, scornfully:

"The man of it, and again the fool of it. You would protect her who has scorned, and flouted, and

humiliated you."

"The fault was mine," he flashed. "And you know it; and I know it."

"Then why did you do it?"

He shook his head, eyes again leaden.

"God knows," he whispered.

She stood for a moment; then again laughter rippled from the red lips.

"But why should we quarrel?" she asked, gently. "There are things in life more sweet." She went to him, leaning toward him, beautiful arms extended, lissome body bent.

"A kiss, My Fool," she whispered.

He turned from her.

"No," he cried.

She smiled.

"I said, 'A kiss, My Fool!'" she repeated.

"I heard."

Her eyes were on him.... Slowly he turned.... The set jaw relaxed; the straight limned lips weakened.... He looked at her.

Her lips now were almost upon his own; her eyes were very close to his. Again she whispered; softly, sibilantly, caressingly:

"A kiss, My Fool!"

* * * * *

He thrust her from him.

"You devil!" he cried. "I love you—and I hate you! You are beautiful— and you're ugly! You are sweeter than the last of life—and more bitter than the sodden shame of a secret sin!"

She replied, lightly, arranging the masses of her hair with deft, slender fingers:

"All of which is quite as it should be, My Fool; for the hate makes the love but the more poignant; the ugliness is but a fair setting for the beauty; and sweetness in bitterness is far more sweet than sweetness alone."

Her mood was different now. He had sunk into the great chair. She seated herself upon its arm; her head sunk to his; her cheek against his.... And again he kissed her, on the lips.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT.

THE BATTLE.

The car stopped before the porte-cochere. Blake alighted. He knew well the way. He did not ring; for the door was unlocked—ajar. Jaw close set— lips but a thin straight line, he made his way down the great, dark, silent hall. He had come to do that which it were hard to do. When one has been the friend of such a man as John Schuyler was—when one has felt toward a man as such a man as John Schuyler must be felt toward—when one has known that man to do the things that he has done—when one has seen the misery—the suffering unutterable that he has caused—the shame beyond depth, the grief beyond measurement—and when she upon whom has been heaped this shame and grief and misery and suffering unutterable is the woman one loves—then it becomes not a little thing to go to that man without murder in one's heart and vengeance in one's soul.

Blake knew where he was most likely to find the man that had been his friend. There he went,

thrusting open the broad door. He paused upon the threshold....

The woman, lifted her head.... She moved away from Schuyler, arranging the dead black masses of her hair.... She laughed a little.

Schuyler turned. Eyes again leaden saw Blake.

"You!" he cried.

Blake said no word.

Schuyler laughed, raucously.

"So you, of all, have not decided to flee from the leper."

Blake, looking at him, said, slowly:

"No; I stay behind and stand the stench for the sake of him who was my friend."

"Is the stench then so great that it precludes the common courtesy of announcing your presence?"

Blake made no answer to this.

"I wish to see you alone," he said, simply.

Schuyler half swung from him.

"You may see me as I am." he returned, doggedly.

"And a most damnably unpleasant sight it is."

Schuyler wheeled.

"You go too far," he said, threateningly.

"Too far?" repeated Blake. "Impossible.... I wish to see you alone—if you, and this woman—dare."

She, smiling, bowed, graciously.

"By all means," she agreed, easily.

"No!" cried Schuyler. "Stay where you are."

She shook her head.

"Pray pardon me. I'll wait in the morning room."

Alone, Blake turned and looked at Schuyler. Could it be that this was the man that had been his friend? ... It must be; and yet how could it be? There was in his heart a great bitterness. He could not understand....

Schuyler had turned to him.

"Look here, Tom," he began, doggedly, "before you begin, I wish to tell you that it is useless. Nothing that you can say will change me in the slightest. I've made up my mind; and my decision is unalterable."

"Irrevocable, is the word."

"As you will.... I'm sorry if the course I choose doesn't seem right to you—to the world—sometimes even to myself—and I'll confess to you that it doesn't—But, right, or wrong, it's the only one for me, and I must take it—must, whether I will or not. So, if you've come for a cigar and a chat, well and good. But if for anything else, go and avoid trouble."

"I'm looking for trouble," returned Blake, quietly. He advanced to the table and leaned against it. "Jack," he exclaimed, "you're a damned fool. There was some excuse for the others. Parmalee was a kid—Rogers an old fool—Van Dam—well, absinthe and asininity account for him. And they fell to their fooldom without warning to guard them or precedent to shield them. But you—open-eyed, knowing everything—forewarned and forearmed,—walk fatuously to your doom as one sheep follows another over a precipice. I swear I can't even yet believe that it isn't all a dream. I keep pinching myself and saying to myself that in the morning I'll wake up and go around and tell old Jack all about it as being a good joke. It's an uncanny, filthy sort of a nightmare as it stands, however." He turned to the other; Schuyler was striding up and down the room. "Old man," he pleaded, quietly, "what's the answer?"

Schuyler stopped in his walk. Looking at Blake, he remarked:

"You've never loved. You couldn't know."

"Never loved!" cried Blake, scornfully. "Couldn't know! Hell! You make me tired! What do you mean by debauching and degrading a good, pure word like love by applying it to this snaky, bestial fascination of yours. You're a fool!"

Schuyler advanced upon him, threateningly.

"Don't you call me that, too," he said, tensely.

Blake paid no heed.

"Love!" he cried, disgustedly. "This sordid, sodden passion of yours love! Love lives only where there is sympathy, and respect, and mutual understanding. Do you mean to tell me that you have any respect for this woman? You know well you haven't a bit more respect for her than she has for you, and that's none. Do you mean to tell me there's any sympathy between you? No more than there is between a snake and a bird. And you aren't capable of understanding her any more than she is of understanding you. Love! It's lust! And you know it!"

Schuyler had dropped into a chair. Blake finished. He swung toward him.

"Go on!" he almost hissed, through clenched teeth. "Go on! If you can tell me anything that I haven't told myself, I'd like to hear it. Tell me what you think. Tell me what everyone thinks. Put into words the scorn and contempt that I see in every eye that looks into mine—in every mirror that I look into. Go on! Tell me something else! But let me tell you one thing! When Destiny can't get a man any other way, she sends a woman for him.... And the woman gets him."

Blake looked at him.

"A fool there was"; he quoted. Schuyler interrupted.

"Stop!" he commanded. "Don't you suppose I know that thing by heart— every syllable—every letter of it? Don't you suppose I know what it means—all that it means—better than you can ever know?" He struck his forehead with clenched fist. "Tell me the things that lie here!" his voice was almost a scream. "The things that lie here, and burn, and burn, and burn! Tell me the things that lie here!" He struck his forehead again.

"I'll tell you this," said Blake, voice cold, and ringing. "It was written for you by a man who knew you; and you'll listen."

"No!" protested Schuyler. He started to rise from his chair. But Blake, catching him by the shoulders, thrust him back, holding him pinioned. "You fool," he remarked, bitterly. "You poor, pitiful, puling fool! 'Honor, and faith, and a sure intent'—a wife, a child, a reputation, a character. 'Stripped to his foolish hide,' the poem reads. But you're stripped to your naked, sodden skeleton. If I weren't so sorry for you, I could cut your throat. When I think of the little girl—calling you daddy—honoring you—loving you—and of what you've done for her! When I think of your wife—of the woman who went through the pains of childbirth for you—who held you sacred in that great, loving, glorious heart of hers—who gave, and gave, and gave asking only that there might be the more to give—You say that maybe I don't know what love is. Well, maybe I don't—and maybe I do. There are some things that a man may not tell his best friend—there are some things that a man may not even tell himself. But I'm different from you, thank God, and I love differently."

He moved back. Schuyler remained seated. Leaden eyes had in them now a new light—the light of suffering refined. Blake commanded:

"Stand up. Look me in the eye, as man to man—if you can."

Swiftly Schuyler rose to his feet. The two men stood face to face, eye to eye.

"Now," cried Blake, hope in his heart—hope ringing in his voice, "will you be a man, or a thing that earth, nor heaven, nor even hell has room for?"

[Illustration]

DEFEAT.

Came from the door of the morning room a light, ringing, musical laugh. The woman stood there, white arms extended above her head, hands resting on door sides.

Schuyler fell back a step. Blake turned.

Again she laughed, lightly, ripplingly. And then:

"What a splendid revivalist was lost to the world when your friend became a mere broker!" And to Blake: "Why once or twice I myself became almost enthusiastic. Really, sir, you are a most convincing speaker—though if you will pardon a well-meant criticism, your low tones are a bit harsh."

There was in Blake's heart a great bitterness. When first he had come to see the man that had been his friend, there had been in his breast but little hope. Later, however, he had understood better; and there had awakened within him an idea that perhaps, after all, it was not too late—and then had come confidence, and the desire to fight. And he had fought. He had almost won. But now, he knew that he had lost; for in Schuyler's eyes he saw dull, hopeless docility, and in The Woman's, conscious power and strength beyond measure.

He turned. He looked at this woman who was his foe—his victor.

Slowly he said:

"There is supposed to be honor among thieves. Apparently there is none among libertines."

He took his hat from where it lay amid the confusion of the table. He bowed, first to the woman, then to Schuyler. He was a proud man—a strong man. It hurt him to lose—and the more because the stake had been so great.... He passed across the room, and through the door, closing it behind him.

Upon the woman, still laughing in the delight of her success, Schuyler rounded. There was in his heart, too, a great bitterness—a great hurt. For he, too, realized how near he had been to salvation—and that realization made the present distance seem yet greater than ever before; and God alone knew how great that was.

"I hope you're satisfied," he remarked, dully. "Now even he has gone. You've broken the last link that bound me to the life that was."

Again she laughed, ringingly, merrily.

Then the greatness of his wrath obsessed him.

"Laugh!" he cried, wildly. "Laugh at your fool!—the helpless, spineless, soulless fool who does your bidding even to the depths of hell! Laugh! ... Laugh! ..." Suddenly, his body seemed to wither. He leaned weakly against the back of the great chair.... His head sunk slowly upon his arms....

There came suddenly from the stairway a little, delighted, cry in childish treble.

"Daddy! Daddy, dear!"

Schuyler, head buried, thought at first that it was but within himself that he heard—that it was that other sense—that unknown sense—that had called him.... The cry came again.... Slowly he raised his head, and looked....

A great, cold clutch tore his heart. His veins stiffened. His head reeled. He staggered, back, clutching for support, at the chair. Even this had come to him!

It was she—his daughter—the child of his wife, and of himself—the child that had been his to love when still he had been man.

The little one was scampering down the stairs, tiny feet pattering upon thick carpet. Her eyes were dancing; her lips smiling; there was in her the great, unequivocating, unquestioning gladness of the young.

"Daddy!" she cried, again, all delight. "Daddy, dear!"

He hesitated.... Then swiftly he ran to her, seizing her in eager, thrilling arms, hiding her face against his breast, that she might not see—Yet was it too late.

"Oh, what a beautiful lady, daddy!" cried the little one. "Who is she?"

He gasped. He choked. He could not answer.... The woman stood looking on, smiling—still smiling.

At length he found words:

"How did you come here, little sweetheart?" he asked.

"I runned away," she returned. "I was in the Park, with Mawkins. I left her while she was talking to a p'liceman.... Oh, daddy, dear! When are we coming home? I miss you so much!"

The woman moved forward, eyes upon the kneeling, soul-torn man; and upon the little child that was his.

"Another advocate!" she said. "It has been skilfully planned."

"What does she mean, daddy?" queried the child.

He answered, quickly:

"Nothing, dearie."

The woman stepped forward. He hurriedly drew the child from her.... Again she smiled, a little.... There were some things that she understood, that were of the Known.

The child was speaking:

"And, daddy," she said, "mother dear isn't a bit well. Mawkins and I are dreadfully worried about her."

"What's the matter with mother?" he asked, quickly. "Tell me!"

The child shook her head.

"She cries most all the time," she replied. "And when I ask her what the matter is, she just shakes her head and says, 'Nothing, dearie. Mother's tired.' But people don't cry because they're tired, do they, daddy?"

He did not answer. Head sunk in hands, the bitterness of it all—the awful, ghastly, horror of the things that he had done—was obsessing him body and soul and brain and heart. The fires of the uttermost hell were flaring through his very being.

Then it was that the woman beckoned to the child of the man that belonged to her.

"Come here, dear," she said, voice modulated. The man might not hear yet.

The child hesitated.

"I'd rather not," she replied.

The woman bent forward, swiftly, undulatingly, as a snake strikes. She seized the child, clasping her to her. And once, twice, thrice, she kissed her, on the lips.... The man awoke. He staggered to his feet.... Through the door came Blake. He, too, saw; and while he did not understand all, he understood enough.

Across the room he sprang. He tore the child from the now yielding arms of the woman! Holding tight against him the little one that he loved as his own, he turned savagely upon the man who had once been his friend.

"To think that any human thing could sink so low!" he almost hissed.... And he was gone, taking with him the child he loved.

It is safe to play with a soul just so far—sometimes it is safe to play even farther, when one really knows one's strength.... The woman had possibly overestimated her prowess—and yet possibly she had not—it were hard to tell of one who knows the things that we do not—who does not know the things that we do. There was manhood, and honor, and decency in Schuyler yet—a little, of a sort. He struck her in the face—full upon the vivid, crimson lips—and a little of their crimson seemed to leave its lair. It trickled down upon the dead whiteness of her skin.... But she still smiled. Her white arms went forth languorously. Her lithe, slender, beautiful body undulated. Her eyes were on his.... She still smiled....

Again he struck her.... Still she smiled.... Her eyes looked into his.

He raised his hand to strike again.... The hand did not fall.... Her eyes were on his; and she still

smiled.... She gauged her power well. Perhaps, at times, she flattered it, a little—but never much.... She still smiled.... Perhaps, it was that which she desired. It were hard to tell. For, after all....

[Illustration]

CHAPTER THIRTY.

AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

Blake, leaving the house, lifted Muriel into the big, French car and got in beside her. Her little mind was in great puzzlement; and of Blake she began to ask the countless questions that flew to her lips. "Why was daddy living there, when mother dear and she were with Aunt Elinor?" "Who was the lady that she had seen, and did he know her?" "Was daddy living there all alone, and when was he coming to live with them, as he used?" and many, many more.

Some of them Blake answered as best he could; others he evaded. His heart ached within him sorely.... Almost he wished that he were a woman; the relief of tears would have meant much.

With childish, wondering question stinging deeper and yet more deep, he watched the stream of traffic swirl past—car and cab, brougham and 'bus. They were on the Avenue—Fifth Avenue, like which there is no other street in our land.

On they went, past great club, past rows of magnificent residences, past towering church and staid old dwelling. They came at length to the Plaza, with its hotels, and glistening statue. The Park lay to the left, a thing of green, with its arching trees. Uniformed nurses were wheeling little perambulators; others were watching active, tousled-headed little charges. Anon there flashed past a group of galloping riders.

At length they turned into a side street. The car stopped before a house of brick and stone, with wrought-iron lattices. Blake got out, lifting the child.

The butler admitted them. Mrs. VanVorst was in, he said, in response to Blake's query; Mrs. Schuyler was out....

It had been some time since Blake had seen Kathryn. She had been very ill, very ill—ill almost unto death. This had followed the receipt of a letter from John Schuyler—a letter which made futile all their efforts to spare her suffering—a letter in which he had been condemned of his own hand. Dr. DeLancey had labored hard, and well. In the end she was saved. But Dr. DeLancey was an old man—a very old man; and, when he had seen that she was saved, he himself had passed away. Possibly it was as well; for he was a lonely old man, you know; and those few whom he loved had brought him much suffering. It was a strange letter, that letter that had wrought so much—a letter utterly unlike the man who wrote it. It was, in part:

"... God himself only knows how I feel. I can scarce believe that it is I who write. And yet it must be I. There is no such thing as redemption—no such thing as hope—no such thing as palliation, or excuse. It is simply an end of me that is not death. Would to God it were. Death would be welcome—even a death of torture refined. There is nothing that I could say that you would understand for nothing that I could say would I myself understand. It is simply the end.... I hope I am insane. Yet I fear that I am not.... I am a ship without a rudder. My will is gone from me; I have no volition of my own—no soul—nothing. All that is left of me is a body, and the power still to suffer, and for the rest, only a great emptiness, and a greater pain."

Kathryn had fainted, when she received that letter. Then fever had come, and with it, delirium. Which was merciful. For weeks she lay closer to death than to life.... Now she was better; and yet far from well. Violet eyes were sad—dull. Brown-gold flesh was pallid. She moved with languor.

For weeks no word of all that meant so much was spoken; it was a topic carefully avoided.

One day Kathryn had said that she must go to see Schuyler. They had tried to dissuade her; without success. This was to have been the day. So Blake himself had gone, eager to bear for her the shock, should there be a shock to be borne; and if not, to render easy her going.

Elinor met him as he entered the drawing room. He set the child down, bidding her go find her nurse; then he turned to Mrs. VanVorst.

"I have seen him," he said, simply.

She looked the query that there was no need for lips to speak.

He shook his head.

"It is impossible," he declared. "Quite impossible. She was there."

"We must dissuade Kathryn from going, then," said Elinor.

He smiled, grimly, sadly.

"It will not be hard, I fear. Muriel was there, too."

And that was why Kathryn Schuyler did not go, then, to John Schuyler.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE.

THAT WHICH MEN SAID.

A winter had come, and gone. It had been a bitter winter, and a cold. For Kathryn Schuyler had it been a bitter winter, indeed. Sick of heart, sick of body, she had stayed in the city, going out not at all, seeing of all her friends only Blake, trying with all her pride, with all her strength, to adjust herself to the new order of things. It had been a weary winter—a winter that dragged along on laggard feet, loitering, waiting.

The love of Muriel, the sympathy of Elinor, the devotion of Blake were in it the only bits of brightness. She felt strange—lost—astray. By day, she was dull, listless. At night sometimes, she slept a little; at others she would bury her face in her tumbled pillow, and her lithe body would heave with the wracking of her sobs; for the entire structure of her life had been ruthlessly torn down by the hand of one man. It seemed to her that from its ruin nothing might ever be erected.

She told this to Blake, one day. Side by side, they had been sitting by the window, gazing out into a sleet-swept street where horses slipped and slid, and hurrying foot-passengers passed with heads buried in collars, or furs.

He had said but little in reply—merely that there are things in this world that we do not know, and that happiness sometimes come whence we least expect it. He did not say these things with any great degree of confidence. In his own life, there had been but little save longing unsatisfied, prayers ungranted. But she took from it comfort—even though there seemed in it so pitifully little from which comfort might be derived. Perhaps it was the way in which he said it; or perhaps it was because it was he who said it.

However, winter at length dragged out its weary life to its weary end. Spring came, and with it the soft green of the new born grass, and the lighter shoots of crocus, and lily, and the buds of the trees. Spring grew; and the stolid phalanx of city homes began to don their summer armor of boards, and blinds and shaded windows.

And then the Larchmont place was opened. John Schuyler had sent to Kathryn the deed of it; the one request that he had made was that she continue to live there—that she take Muriel there.

During all this time no word of him had come to her. Blake had heard. But no word had he said to Kathryn, because of the things that he had heard. A man of the breadth of acquaintance, of the breadth of interests, that was John Schuyler's may not fall to desuetude unwatchful. And Blake heard, at clubs, at theatres, wherever men congregate, of Schuyler, and of the life that was his. And he, as little as they, could explain.

Schuyler was drinking, they told him—drinking hard. The woman? Was she still in New York? Yes; she had been seen at the opera; she had been seen driving in the Mall. A damnable strange case, the whole thing. Grewsome! And, save Blake, they would wash the taste of it all from their mouths with liquor. Devilishly good fellow, Schuyler. Brainy, too. He would have been one of the big men of the country, if it hadn't been for this.

A chance to save him? They shook their heads, and smiled, grimly. You know how it is, yourself. When a man gets into the hands of a woman like that, what can you do? Say anything against her, and you have to fight him. Tell him he's a fool and he tells you to mind your own business. Try to reason with

him, then? If the man had any reason left in him, there would be no occasion to reason. It's hard, true. But your hands are tied. It's just, "Good-bye," and a prayer for the next man.... So they reasoned. And could Blake say that they were wrong? ... Could you?

[Illustration]

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO.

IN THE GARDEN.

Kathryn stood beside the blossom-laden arbor, culling fragrant tender blossoms from the wealth before her. Beside her, Muriel, little skirt upheld, received them.

"Mother, dear," said the child, at length.

"Yes, honey?"

"Does God make roses?"

"Yes, dearie."

"Who made God?"

Her mother smiled. "He made Himself. God makes everything, dearie."

With troubled brows the little one asked:

"Did God sit down when He made His feet?"

Came from the house Elinor. She moved lithely, swiftly, now. The old tan had come back to her cheek; she was no longer an invalid.

"More roses, Kate?" she asked, brightly.

Kathryn nodded.

"Yes," she said. "It seems almost brutal to cut them, doesn't it? But I love them in my room; and they won't grow there."

"Then sleep out here. It's quite the thing, nowadays."

Kathryn smiled a little.

"You're so frightfully lacking in sensibilities, Nell."

"And," returned her practical sister, "a lot more comfortable because I am." She seated herself. "Tom's back," she announced.

A quick little gleam of gladness sprang to the violet eyes.

"Is he?"

Elinor nodded, nonchalantly.

"Yes, that floating palace of his dropped anchor about ten minutes ago. They were lowering a launch as I came downstairs."

"Oh!" cried Muriel, excitedly dropping the roses to the lawn. "There he is now! I can hear him winding up his boat!"

She rang at headlong speed through that arbor way. Another moment and Blake had entered, carrying her in his arms. Kathryn extended her hand to him; he took it in warm, firm, friendly clasp. Elinor nodded.

"Lo, Tom," was her salutation.

"Lo, Nell," he returned. "You're getting fat."

"The same to you, and many of 'em," she replied. "Have a good time?"

"Oh, the same old sea-saw." He shrugged broad shoulders. "This running a sailors' boarding house isn't what it's cracked up to be. We hit a three-day executive session of a northeast storm off the Banks that kept us exceedingly busy. Everyone on board was seasick—except the cook."

"Tom," interrupted Kathryn, "I wish you'd come into the library a moment. My lawyers have sent me some papers to sign and return, and I can't make head nor tail of them."

"Of course you can't," he said, assuringly. "I never know what my lawyers are doing. If I did, I'd fire them and do it myself. And they realize it. A lawyer can order a fried egg, cooked on one side only, and make it sound like a royal proclamation announcing a total change of the currency system. They're like doctors and clairvoyants. Their graft lies in being mysterious. Why does a doctor call pink eye *muco puerpural conjunctivitis*? Because pink eye is not worth more than a dollar at the outside; but when he hands you *muco puerpural conjunctivitis*, he can get twenty-five at least before you wake up and say, 'Where am I?'"

His humor, perhaps, was forced; possibly there was nothing funny in what he said; but they laughed. There was always a tension at "Grey Rocks," now—always a strain. It needed little to relieve it; it needed that little badly. Blake gave to that little all that he could.

Even the child felt the tension, and the strain of it. She could not have told what it was; but she missed something beside her daddy, infinite was her longing for him, and her loneliness without him.

At times she used to beg the dignified Roberts to play buck-jump, and tag, with her, as "daddy used to do." And this she did while Blake and her mother and her Aunt Elinor were in the library, going over the troublesome papers with their imposing seals and undecipherable writing.

"I've been looking for you everyw'ere, Miss Muriel," the butler announced, impressively. Everything that Roberts did was impressive.

"Were you, Woberts?" she queried. "You didn't want to play hide-and-go seek, did you, Woberts? Because if you did, I'd like to heaps and heaps."

He opened his lips in protest; but she interrupted:

"I'll be it, Woberts, and you can run and hide. Oh! Will you?"

What could he say? It hurt his dignity—it was a distinct prostitution of pride—and yet, what could he say? What could he do? For he, too, loved, pitied, and was sorry.

Thus it was that, returning from the library, Kathryn, Elinor and Blake came upon a red-faced and puffing butler engaged in giving a most realistic imitation of a bear, while a delighted little girl, clapping tiny hands in glee, adjured him to growl as bears growl, not as cows growl.

It was another welcome little break in the tension. And for that it was welcome; welcome, that is, to all but him of the outraged dignity. And even he, though he puffed and huffed below stairs, deep down in his heart was glad that he had sacrificed his most precious possession in such a cause.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE.

TEMPTATION.

Elinor VanVorst swung around in her chair, and eyed her sister.

"Well, Kate?" she asked.

Kate raised violet eyes in protest.

"Please, Nell, don't insist," she begged. "I don't want to talk about it."

Her sister continued, firmly:

"It must be talked of.... You must divorce him, Kate."

"No!"

"But I say, 'Yes!' You should hear what people are saying about you."

"What do I care what people are saying about me? It's what I think of myself that counts."

"That may be true," her sister retorted; "but it's too idealistic for this world.... Moreover, you're not consistent."

Kathryn looked up, quickly.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

Elinor shrugged her shoulders, a little and answered:

"You're compromising. You're hedging. If he isn't good enough to live with, he isn't good to be married to."

"But," Kathryn protested. "I can't live with him, Nell! You know as well as I how impossible that is."

"Then," returned Elinor, rising, "divorce him."

Kathryn shook her head, wearily.

"I can't do that, either."

The other turned.

"Then what are you going to do?" she demanded. "Are you going on forever being honest neither with him nor with yourself—compromising on the one hand with your womanhood, on the other with your selfishness? How long has it been since you made the slightest effort to see him, or to send anyone to him?"

Kathryn answered, slowly:

"Not since the time I tried to go, and Tom went before me. I—I have thought, often, of going.... But, somehow, I've been—afraid." In almost a whisper, she repeated, "Yes.... Afraid!"

Elinor VanVorst raised her shoulders in an expressive gesture. It conveyed more plainly than could words that her end of the argument was done—her case was rested.

Kathryn considered long, earnestly, in silence. Divorce him! Divorce John Schuyler! It had occurred to her—it had occurred to her in the long silences of the night—in the thousands of aeons that had lain, oftentimes, between the setting of the sun and the rising thereof.... Divorce him! ... It was a thought that stung. He had been to her all that any man could have been. He had been a man of whom her head was proud and her heart fond with the great love that lies in the heart of a good woman. He it was, and God, who had given her the little child that she could see from where she sat, rolling, a tumbled little heap of white lace and whirling brown legs on the broad expanse of the green lawn. He it was who had taken the first of her life—who had shown her what it was to live....

And then this thing had come—this awful, hideous thing that had stretched even her very life to the breaking point, and drained from it the wealth of sweetness to the uttermost drop.... She felt resentment, yes, and horror, and disgust. Yet there were other things, she knew, though she could not have told how she knew. There was something that was hidden—something unknown and unknowable....

Long, she thought, and earnestly—as she had thought so many, many times before—times without end.... At length she rose. Firm little chin was set; violet eyes were firm.

She said, slowly:

"I think I see your point, Nell. You're right."

"And you'll divorce him?"

Kathryn shook her head.

"No," she replied softly, "I'll go to him."

Elinor started.

"What!" she cried, untrustful of her own ears.

"I have failed in my duty; you have shown me wherein I have failed. I'll go to him."

Elinor caught her hand.

"Kate!" she pleaded. "Kate, dear, listen to me! I haven't shown you your duty if that's what you consider your duty.... I'll tell you something that you haven't thought of.... Muriel."

In almost a gasp, her sister cried:

"Muriel! ... Muriel!"

"Can you take her with you?" demanded Elinor.

Kathryn shook her head.

"No," she replied. "Of course not. I shall leave her here, with you."

Her sister shook her head.

"Do you see?" she queried. "Can you go to him, and live with him, as wife?" Kathryn made no answer. Again Elinor shook her head, gently. "Don't you understand," she asked. "It's compromise on compromise—hedging on hedging. Can't you see how impossible it all is? ... how utterly impossible?"

Torn of anguish, of inability to solve the problems that God had laid before her, Kathryn turned beseeching eyes to her sister.

"But what shall I do, Nell?" she asked, beseechingly. "What can I do.... Wasn't it hard enough, even that way?"

Elinor replied, gently:

"Too hard. I want to make it easier. I want you to leave him irrevocably. Then you can forget him; but not until then."

Kathryn was silent.

"What does Tom say?" she asked, at length. She had learned to depend much upon the big-bodied, big-hearted, big-minded friend of late.

"I haven't asked him," returned her sister. "But I will, now."

She rose, quickly, and went to the rose-strewn arbor-way. She could see Blake, out upon the broad lawn, playing with the child that he loved, boyish, natural, whole-souled, with all the enthusiasm unspoiled that God gives not to many who are grown.

"Tom!" she called.

"Yes?" he answered.

"Will you come here, to us, for a moment? Let Muriel stay with Mawkins."

"Right, oh!" he called, cheerily. In another moment he stood in the opening of the arbor, hair ruffled, clothing awry.

"Well?" he asked, inquiringly.

Elinor began, slowly:

"Tom, Kate and I have been talking, seriously. I want her to leave John Schuyler—legally leave him—leave him for all time. It's the only fair—the only right—thing to do. I'm not going to argue. It is all sufficiently plain. She can't live with him; and yet, as long as she is his wife, she has no right to be away from him. And she can never go to him."

"She wants your opinion, Tom," she went on. "She's always respected your judgment more than mine—more than that of anyone save the man upon whom she may never depend again."

Kathryn had wandered to where the white blooms clustered thickest. She was thinking—thinking deeply, bitterly. Elinor drew closer to Blake.

"I like you, Tom," she said, softly. "You're a good man—a decent man—a clean man—and they're mighty scarce these days.... All that Kate may have owed to John Schuyler, she long since paid to the last sad penny.... All your life you have been paying the things that you did not owe.... There is happiness, somewhere; a happiness that can be found." She thrust out her hand. "Tell her what to do,"

she said. "Tell her the right thing to do—the thing that should be done." And she turned on her heel, and went away.

For a long, long time Blake stood motionless. Of that which was going on within his soul, no one might know. The expression of his face remained the same, and of his body. Only his hands clenched, and unclenched, and clenched again. It was a difficult position in which he found himself— how difficult only he might know. There lay before him a vast, spreading vista of golden possibility—a possibility of which he had never dared to think—even to dream. Possibly it were but a possibility—and yet surely it was that. A word from him would so make it. That he knew. On the other hand—

For yet a longer time, he stood, hands clenching, unclenching, clenching.... Slowly he went to where the woman he loved stood, slender white fingers plucking nervously at bending blossoms of fragrant whiteness.

She turned, a little. Violet eyes slowly lifted.... He looked into their depths.... His hands clenched, and unclenched more swiftly.

"Kate," he said, at length, slowly, very slowly, "do you want me to tell you what to do?"

She answered, with infinite weariness:

"I—I don't know, Tom.... I'm tired—so, so tired...." And then, abruptly: "Tell me.... Yes, tell me. What shall I do?"

She waited, deep eyes lifted, little head poised wearily upon white, rounded throat.

He answered, very slowly—with effort that even he could not conceal:

"Kate, do you remember that day in June, eight years ago, when you walked down the aisle of Old Trinity. Do you remember how the sun shone in at the windows, flecking the darkness of the old pews with golden motes? John Schuyler met you at the altar; and to him you said, 'For better or for worse, in sickness and in health, till death us do part.'"

Gently he laid his hand upon her shoulder, with great tenderness.

"Stick, Kate," he advised, softly. "Stick."

And that was all.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR.

THE SHROUD OF A SOUL.

It had been arranged that Blake, again, was to go to him first. Little had been heard of John Schuyler, of late. A drop to desuetude may of its last half be far more silent than of its first. One gathers momentum, as one descends, whether the descent be physical, or moral. At the inception comes the gradual slipping—the vast, frantic effort to stay that slipping—the exertion, the hysteria, the fright, the remorse, the stretching out of hands to aid and of souls to help.... Then, things become different. There comes a vast silence. The hands draw back; the souls are hidden; and when Hope itself lifts its pinions and soars away, then there be little left indeed.

John Schuyler, deserted of friends, deprived of all usefulness in the life that he had loved, found it to be so; and, finding, tried to think no more.... If only the Great God would take from him his brain! ... But He did not....

All were gone from him now save She—The Woman. The doctor came occasionally when summoned by Parks—Parks who had known and loved in other days. And the coming of the doctor, and of Her, were the only things that marked the beginning of the days, and the ending thereof. He lived in the study a part of the time, a part of the time in his rooms. The rest of the house knew him not; and the great out-of-doors, even in its warrenated streets of the city, but seldom. And from the study, at least, all save She were excluded.

He had been worse that day—much worse. Parks had stayed indoors all day, listening. As night came on, he had become frightened. The telephone in the hall had been out of order; and he had taken upon

himself the liberty of entering the forbidden demesne; for the doctor must be called.

The door of the library-study creaked as he opened it.... He stopped upon the threshold, aghast.

This could not be the same room that he had seen so short a time before. He looked about him, in horrified disbelief. Before him there lay the very essence of dirt and disorder. Furniture was broken, overturned. Rugs were askew, wrinkled. The desk, upbearing broken bottles and a cluttered mess of paper, letter and debris of all description, was scratched and dented. Pictures sagged drunkenly upon the walls; hangings were torn, and dragged, and over all lay a pall of dust, dank, choking.

Slowly, dreadingly, horror gripping his heart, Parks crossed the room to the desk. He picked up the telephone from where it rested amid the litter and placed the receiver to his ear. The voice of the operator came to him across the wire.

"Hello," he called, "Give me 2290 Plaza, please."

At length there came to him an answer. He inquired:

"Is this Dr. Grenelle's office?" It was the doctor himself. "This is Parks—Mr. Schuyler's secretary.... He is worse—much worse.... You had better send someone to take care of him. I am going away.... Yes, that's all. Goodbye."

Hanging up the receiver, Parks sought amid the confusion of the desk for a sheet of paper, and envelope. At length he found them; but the pens on the desk were beyond use, and the ink-stands dried and dusty.

It had taken Parks a long time to come to the decision that he should leave this house. Long, and faithfully, and well had he served John Schuyler. He had served him gladly, and given of his best. And, until it had come, had he received besides generous pecuniary rewards, the more grateful compensation of pleasant treatment, consideration, good-fellowship, friendliness. He could not have cared more for John Schuyler had he been of kin to him.... But the disintegration of a man's soul, and brain, and body, is not a pleasant thing to watch. It had come to a place where Parks, in his heart, felt that he could do no more. For the rest, there was nothing to detain him longer.

At first Parks, as most, had come to think that the man was innately a libertine, awaiting but the right one to strike the hidden flint and set the tinder aglow—the tinder that would burn, and consume, and destroy. He had known of men like that—of men who went the even pathway of their lives until there crossed it another who tore them from it; and that one they followed, leaving soul and morals and decency and cleanliness forever behind them. This, at first, he had thought to be John Schuyler. For the woman was beautiful—beautiful as an animal is beautiful.... But then he had not been so sure. His confidence had been shaken; for she had looked into his eyes, too, playfully; and he had felt his very being rock upon its foundation, and he had slunk away, chilled, helpless, horror-ridden.... After that he had avoided her. She had paid no attention to him....

So the anger—the disgust—the resentment that at first he had felt had at length been altered to sorrow, and grief, and pity beyond utterance Yet there had been nothing that he could do—nothing.... He could not sleep, of nights.... It was killing him, too....

Upon the soiled, rumpled sheet he wrote.... Came a noise behind him. He looked up, quickly, frightenedly.... It was Blake; and quick relief sprang to the clean-cut face.

But the horror of it was in Blake's. Even as had Parks', his eyes wandered dreadingly about the room. The horror of it all was in his soul, too.... For a long time he said no word. He only looked. He thrust the curtains aside.... The dust, impalpable, strangling, fell about him

"Good God!" he muttered. "Good God in heaven!"

He saw Parks.

"Has it been like this for long?" he asked.

Parks shook his head.

"I don't know," he answered.... And then: "It must have been. The servants are all gone."

"Servants gone?"

"Yes; there's been no one below stairs for a fortnight. They irritated him, and he discharged them, one and all."

"His valet?"

"Went last night. I go to-morrow.... To have known him as he was—and then to see him as he is—I couldn't stand it any longer."

There was a pause. Blake looked about him. At length he spoke:

"Does—she come here, now?"

"Seldom. No one else ever comes. It's a lonely place, sir—frightfully lonely."

"And he?"

"Drink, if you will pardon me—and remorse. He seems bent only upon forgetting everything. Try as I will I can't keep the brandy from him. All day—all night—he drinks, and drinks, and tries to forget."

Blake nodded. "I see."

Parks continued:

"At first it made him drunk, and he slept. But now it seems only to numb his senses. I hear him all through the night muttering—muttering. I hear him cursing himself—cursing everything, everybody—cursing her—that woman—then calling to her—calling—calling—It's horrible!"

Blake again nodded.

"I had heard," he said. "But I didn't dream it was as bad as this.... It is too late, then, you think—too late to do anything? I had thought that if we should wait—until she was tired—as such as she must tire sooner or later—"

"Too late?" repeated Park. "It has always been too late. It was too late from the first. I was with him, you know."

"Yes—abroad. I had forgotten."

Parks exclaimed, almost fiercely:

"I wish to God I could! He was a man, sir—a man!" Then, in quick transition: "I beg your pardon. But I was very fond of him." He placed the resignation that he had written fair in the center of the desk. He turned to go.

Blake called after him:

"You are leaving?"

Parks nodded.

"Don't you think you'd better stay a little longer? You can help him."

Parks shook his head; there was in his voice a great sadness.

"No one can help him now. It is too late.... Too late."

[Illustration]

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE.

THE THING THAT WAS A MAN.

Schuyler came down the stairs slowly, leaning heavily against the broken balustrade. He laughed a little, wildly, with the mirthless chill that is of a maniac. His knees bent; he staggered.... And he laughed again....

At first Blake did not know him.... Then, knowing, he could not believe that his eyes brought to his brain the truth.... This was not John Schuyler. It could not be John Schuyler. It was not possible. John Schuyler was at least a man—not a palsied, pallid, shrunken, shriveled caricature of something that had once been human.... John Schuyler had hands—not nerveless, shaking talons.... This sunken-eyed, sunken-cheeked, wrinkled thing was not John Schuyler—this thing that crawled, quiveringly—from the

loose, pendulous lips of which came mirth that was more bitter to hear than the sobs of a soul condemned.

Blake's soul was curdled; his senses were numbed; but still his eyes could look.

The ghastly figure stopped in the moonlight, at the landing of the stairs. White, claw-like hand clutched at the drunken curtain and ripped it from its fastenings. The pale light of the moon fell harsh upon it.... Blake shut his eyes....

When again he looked, the figure was at the desk, fumbling with a key.... A drawer screeched in protest. Came from it a rattling as a cadaverous hand drew forth a bottle.... And the thing that had been John Schuyler guzzled.

It laughed again, then, in hollow, mad glee. It staggered forward. Its hollow eyes fell upon the letter that Parks had left. Clutching fingers unsteadily tore end from envelope—drew letter from covering, and hollow, leaden eyes gazed.

Came another wild burst of laughter gone mad. A voice, thick, weak, muffled, weird, said:

"Another enveloped insult. From Parks, the good and faithful Parks." Dull eyes read. "Your employment has become impossible." The letter fell to the floor; the voice cried: "The rats desert the sinking ship!" It chuckled: "Wise rats. Sensible rats!" And then dead eyes saw the man who stood before him.

"You?" They peered, like those of a fish. "Good! I'm glad to see you, even though you have come to scorn, and abuse, and hate. It's a lonely hell, this—lonely."

Blake answered, bitterness in his soul:

"I did not come because I wanted to. It was to prevent her coming—the wife who loved you, and who, God help her, loves you still. She would make one last effort to save you."

Schuyler laughed again.

"There's nothing left to save," he chuckled.

"I know; but I'll try for her sake."

Schuyler lurched into a chair. In ghastly playfulness he looked upon the other.

"Try, then," he cackled. "You did so well last time, that you've come to try again, eh? Well, you've come too late. Do you remember Parmalee—the boy who killed himself? The boy that I called a fool?" He laughed, sardonically. "He's got me now—he, and Van Dam, and Rogers—three damned fools scorching in a hole in hell.... 'A fool there was'" he quoted; then, stopping, suddenly, he half rose, weakly, to his feet.

"Listen!" he cried.

There came utter silence.

"Did you hear?" he queried, triumphantly. "Did you hear her calling?"

It was more than Blake could bear.

"Jack!" he cried, tensely. "Jack!"

Schuyler rounded on him. "Don't call me that!" he said, petulantly. "Call me *the Fool*."

Blake shook his head, in the gripping horror of it all.

"It makes me sick," he murmured, to himself, "sick at heart!"

Schuyler had heard.

"It makes me sick, too," he cackled. He pointed to the shattered mirror, above the mantel. "Do you see that?" he demanded. "There isn't a whole one in the house. I don't dare to look at myself."

Came to Blake's mind now, stricken and wracked as it had been, by that which he had seen, a glimmer of hope. He had heard of men like this who had come back to life—to reason. It might be fever—fever and drink; and it might be that the fever could be stayed—the drink conquered. John Schuyler had been a strong man. Surely it could not be that in so short a time he had been dragged to the

grave's very edge. Lack of attention, lack of care, lack of medicine and nursing and discipline were probably largely responsible. The man might be awakened—brought to himself. It might be possible—

Speculatively, not realizing that he spoke aloud, he asked of himself:

"Is there a chance left? Is there one little chance left, to save him?"

Again Schuyler had heard.

"What would be the use?" he queried, dully. The liquor was passing. "What is there left of me to save? I'm a husk—squeezed dry. I'm a memory—a nightmare. They are calling me—Young Parmalee, Rogers, Seward Van Dam. I drink to them, now, even as they drink to me—scorching in their hole in hell!" He rose weakly to his feet, raising a dirty glass in which splashed a little amber liquor.

Came to Blake the thought that, even though Schuyler could not be redeemed to manhood, he might at least, be saved from death, or worse. He might at least be made again into the semblance of that which he had been. He started forward, hands gripping the edge of the desk, face close to Schuyler's own.

"Jack!" he cried, commandingly. "Look here! I want to talk to you!"

Schuyler slumped again into the depths of his chair. He looked up, dully.

"Yes?"

"Listen!" Blake demanded. "Listen closely. There's a chance for you yet! We'll take you away somewhere—for a year—five years—ten years. You can change your name—make a new start—build yourself a new character—a new honor. There's still happiness for you, Jack! We'll go and find it! Come! Shall we?"

Schuyler answered, dully, with the petulance of the mentally unfit:

"It's too late, I tell you—too late!"

"It's not too late! You'll try! Come!"

"It's too late, I say!" insisted Schuyler, thickly. "She's torn from me everything that makes life worth living. She's taken honor and manhood and self-respect—wife and child and friends—everything—everything but— this!" He patted the bare bottle before him. And then: "Let's drink," he muttered.

Blake sprang forward, desperation overwhelming him.

"My God, this is awful!" he exclaimed. "Haven't you a spark of manhood left? no brains? no bowels? nothing a man can appeal to?"

Schuyler repeated, dully:

"Give me that bottle!"

It was then that Blake came to that which he had mentally intended to be a last resort. Deliberately, not in anger, but in the desperation of a strong man who plays his last card for his ultimate stake, he leaned across the table and deliberately struck Schuyler in the face. It was a hard thing to do; but there are things that so demand. Blake knew that if this time he failed to arouse whatever of latent, atrophied manhood there might be in the breast of the other, that never again, probably, would the shrivelling brain come within call. So he struck; and, following the staggering form, struck again, flat on the face, with open hand, hard, stinging blows. And with these blows he cried, tensely:

"If there's any spirit left in you, I'll arouse it. You pitiful thing that was once a man! You made in God's image? Why, there isn't a swine that wouldn't be ashamed to roll in the same gutter with you!"

With stinging words and stinging blows, he pursued the stumbling figure across the room. Schuyler fell. Blake kicked him, sending foot against body, heavily.

"Get up, you beast!" he ordered. And then, in the horror of it all—in the awful of horror of the hurt of the thing that he was doing: "Great God! Will nothing awaken you?"

Schuyler was scrambling weakly to his feet. In dulled eyes there was a little gleam—the little gleam that Blake had tried so hard, so horribly, to bring. The slobbering lip had set a little and the loose, lax jaw.... There was there the shadow of the John Schuyler that was.... Blake stepped back, gladness in his heart.

He had called him back so far. He would call him back the rest!

[Illustration]

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX.

AGAIN THE BATTLE.

Schuyler staggered, stumbled to his feet, thin hands clutching for support at chair arm.

"You struck me!" he mumbled, savagely. "You struck me. You'll fight me— fight me!"

He lifted weakly, balancing himself upon unsteady, weakened legs. Blake, stepping back, found his hand against a glass of water. He seized it— advanced a step—and cast the contents of the glass full into Schuyler's contorting face....

Schuyler slowly came to himself. The shock of the blows—of the words— and finally of the water against his head, sent the blood to his brain— banished the liquor, and the dementia, from it.... A weakened, miserable, pitiful imitation he was of the John Schuyler that had been. Yet it was John Schuyler that sat slumped into the chair, gazing up at the friend who had proven his friendship so often and so well.

Schuyler sat for a moment, eyes blinking. At length his hand went forth, slowly.

"Hello, Tom," he said. "I'm glad to see you." Puzzled eyes went about the room, eyes expanding, contracting, like those of a man who, having been long asleep, awakens to find himself in a place unfamiliar.

Blake went to him, leaning over him.

"You can understand me now?" he asked, tensely.

Schuyler looked up.

"Why, yes," he replied. "Of course, Tom. Of course I can understand you." Eyes again sought to solve the mystery of the room; for from the mind cleared had fled all memories of the mind uncleared.

Blake cried:

"You are coming away with us, Jack—away from this hell-snake of yours! You're coming today—now! Do you understand?"

Schuyler nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I understand." In his mind the real and the unreal were clarifying into an accurate whole. He nodded again.

"There's still a chance for you, Jack." Blake continued, earnestly, all his force in his words. "There's still a chance for you. You're going to be strong, and become a man again! Tell me that you will!"

"It's too late, Tom," he replied. There was in the words sadness, despair, hopelessness unutterable. "It's too late. Body, mind, soul are wasted, gone. There's no chance, Tom. It's too late!"

"No!" cried Blake! "There is happiness for you—real happiness—the right happiness! Your wife—your child—"

"Don't speak of them," Schuyler moaned. "Don't! ... Don't!"

"You must think of them, Jack. It's there that salvation lies. Think of the true woman—the wife who loves you. Think of the little one who used to put baby hands around your neck and try to tell you all the beautiful things that only children know. That is what will save you now, Jack—and only that! Think.... Think!"

"It's too late, Tom!"

"It's not too late!"

"You're sure? Quite, quite sure?"

"I'm sure, Jack!"

There was a pause. Schuyler rose. He thrust forth his hand. Blake took it, gripping it in his own.

"I'll go, Tom. I'll go." Came to him a touch of that from which he had been able to withdraw so pitifully little.

"We'll fool her yet, won't we?" he asked, breathlessly. "We'll fool her, and Young Parmalee, and Rogers, and Van Dam and the rest of them. Let's go now, Tom. Take me away! For the love of God who has forsaken me—whom I have forsaken—take me away! Save me from her—from myself—My blood has turned to water, and my bones to chalk! My brain has withered! Good God! What has come over me! To think that I, who could once look in the eye all men, all women, all little children, should have come to this. Look at me! A fool in his drunken Palace of Folly! Dust, dirt, grime, filth all about me—in my home—in my soul! ... I thought it was too late, Tom. I thought from the beginning it was too late. The shame, the disgrace, the loss of honor—of everything, were new to me. I couldn't understand. Then I cursed myself. I swore to God that I wouldn't become the thing I am. But He didn't help me; and I couldn't help myself. I tried! Ah, how I tried! But there was something—her eyes, it was—eyes that burnt and seared!—I tried to kill myself, as Parmalee did. I couldn't.... And the only forgetfulness lay in drink—drink that sapped my strength and drained my veins and shrivelled my brain. Tell me it's a dream, Tom—that it's all but a vile, horrible, grewsome dream! Tell me that I'm the kind of a man you are! the kind of a man I once was! And don't hate me, Tom. Don't loathe, and despise me, all; but pity me a little—just a little!"

He had sunk in a huddled heap to the floor, weak, hysterical—a half-crazed soul in the white-hot crucible of suffering. Blake leaned over him, gently, and lifting him, helped him to the great chair. There was a great, unselfish gladness in his heart. But that gladness had changed swiftly to horror. He stood back aghast. For there had entered the room Kathryn, and Muriel.

The horror of it all did not show in the eyes of the wife. She would not let it. The child, all gladness, ran to her father; she did not notice.

"Daddy! Oh, daddy!" she called.

Schuyler, a huddled heap by the desk, straightened, weakly.

"You!" he cried, brokenly. Tears welled to his eyes. He seized—the little form in his arms, clutching it to him.

Blake turned to Kathryn.

"You should not have come," he said. He was sorry for the hurt he knew she suffered.

"My place is here." She went to Schuyler, stooping over him.

"Jack, dear." She spoke, very quietly.

He lifted his eyes, dim, moist. His lips worked.

"Oh, daddy!" exclaimed the child. "You've been ill! You look awful!" He bent his head.

"Yes, little sweetheart," he answered, in shaking tone, "very ill. God grant you may never know how ill."

"But you're most well, now, aren't you daddy?" she asked, brightly.

"I hope so," he replied. "Ah, how I hope so." Lips and voice both quivered, now.

"And we can play horsie?" she asked.

"Yes," he assented. He essayed to lift her; but even the tiny weight of the little form was too much for his shattered strength. His head sunk upon the table, arm-buried. His body shook.

The child did not see; which was well. She was looking at her mother.

"Mother, dear," she said reproachfully. "You forgot to kiss daddy."

"Did I? I'm sorry."

Willingly Kathryn went to him. He raised thin, white hand in protest.

"Not now," he murmured, brokenly. "It's not fair—not right!"

The situation was hard—hard for all—no less hard for her than for him— no less hard for Blake than for either. He stepped forward, forcing a lightness of tone and of word that lay farthest from his thought. He laid his hand lightly on Schuyler's shoulder.

"Come, Jack," he said crisply. "It's quite all right. There's no cause for anything but gladness. I'll see them to the hotel, and come back for you."

Schuyler clutched at his strong fingers.

"Don't be long, Tom," he begged, whispering.

"Only a moment," returned Blake, so low that only he might hear. Blake knew that he needed time to regain his self-command. He took Muriel by the hand. "Come, Kate," he suggested.

Kathryn shook her head.

"Leave us for a moment," she urged.

"Do you think it best?"

She bent her head. Taking the child, Blake left the room. And slowly Kathryn again went to Schuyler's side.

"John, dear," she said, softly.

His head fell again to his hands.

"I can bear no more, Kathryn," he whispered, weakly. "Oh, God, how great is Thy goodness! The shame of it all! The shame! The utter, utter shame! ... And you, Kathryn, can forgive!"

"I can forgive, John, dear. I do forgive. It was not your fault. Is it the fault of the bird that he goes to his death when the eyes of the snake are upon him? It was not that you were weak, even; it was that—she was strong, strong in the one way in which she leads. I do forgive— forgive and understand."

[Illustration: I DO FORGIVE—FORGIVE AND UNDERSTAND]

"You are good beyond all goodness," he murmured, voice low, vibrant.

"No," she said. She smiled a smile that was no smile. And then: "It's been a dream, John—a bitter, bitter dream. But we are awake, now—awake at last. And we'll never dream again—never."

She rose. Violet eyes were moist. She turned away, a little, that he might not see. Her voice was lighter as she asked:

"John, dear. Don't you want me to stay and help you?"

He shook his head.

"Go, Kathryn," he requested. "Go with Tom. It will be more merciful to both of us. And I want to be alone—to try to realize that the chance is mine to redeem myself. I want to ask God to try to forgive me, and, in His infinite mercy, to help me atone for all the wrong I've done you."

She bent her head. It was bitterly hard for her, as for him. She knew, as he said, it would be more merciful to them both that she should go. Gently she bent. Her lips touched his bowed head. Slowly she turned. Slowly she walked across the dirty, disordered room. She looked back, once. He was still sitting there, head buried deep in hands.... She was glad, glad unselfishly. She could give him happiness. Would there ever be happiness for her? She was afraid.... Yet she was glad—glad as Blake was glad— Still there was in her a great, great emptiness.

[Illustration]

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN.

THE PITY OF IT ALL.

Left alone, John Schuyler sat for long, never-ending moments. He was weak—weak unto the weakness of death. His soul was torn and tossed and twitched within him. At length he rose, slowly, to his feet. A dizziness— a nausea—overmastered him. He reached for the bottle on the table top. As he

did so, his foot touched some object upon the floor.... He looked down. It was a bit of broken mirror.... He stooped and picked it up. The light upon the table was on. He turned it so that it might illumine with its merciless rays the last cruel line upon his face.... Slowly, holding the mirror so that eyes might see, he looked.... He fell to his knees.... This thing that he saw was he! He! John Schuyler!

Came to him at length strength to rise. Came to his heart great resolves. He would make atonement to the woman whom he had forsaken—the woman who had not forsaken him. He would make atonement in as far as it lay within possibility—and to the child that was of him and of her he would make atonement. He was but a young man; many years of life should lie before him; and of these years he would give, give all, and ask nothing. It was the sad wreck of a life that lay before him—a stinking, noisome wreck— yet there must be something in it that was neither foul nor unsightly. That thing he would find. He set his jaw. Leaden eyes became bright.... Then, he was near to being a man....

He had started toward the door, to leave forever the scene of his moral, mental, spiritual death—he was almost to the portal—another step would carry him through, and beyond—

She stood there. Red lips were parted in a little, inscrutable smile. White shoulders shimmered. Lithe muscles rippled beneath her gown with every movement of her delicate body. She was beautiful—beautiful as an animal is beautiful. And her eyes were upon his.

He staggered back, clutching at the door jamb for support.

She laughed a little, lightly:

"Just in time. You're going away. Bien. I trust you may have a very pleasant journey."

She swung into the room, lithely, eyes upon him, vivid lips smiling. Rounded arms were clasped behind lissome back.

"And if I hadn't gone," he inquired, "you were about to go?"

She nodded.

"To another fool?"

She shook her head, merrily.

"Oh, no," she replied, red lips pursed. "To a man—this time."

He shrunk a little. The madness was not far behind.

"Well, squeeze him dry," he muttered. "Squeeze the honor and the manhood and the life and the soul out of him, won't you? And then Parmalee, and Rogers, and Van Dam will laugh at him from their hole in hell. And I'll laugh at all of you; for I'll be safe from you all. So squeeze him dry, won't you, you Vampire!"

Again she laughed, gaily. He was very amusing, at times—this thing that had been a man. She slid to the desk, seating herself upon it, swinging small, perfectly shod feet with slender silk-clad ankles.

"So it's all over," she remarked, musingly. "Yet it was sweet while it lasted, wasn't it, My Fool?—sometimes." She tossed at him contemptuously a glowing crimson blossom which she ripped from the great mass at her rounded breast. She went on:

"Those days on the Mediterranean, under the blue skies. And Venice, with the dim silence all about, and the soft night breezes whispering their strange secrets to us as we lay side by side under the rustling canopy— very romantic, for dreamers—and we did dream—didn't we, My Fool?—at least, you did." She laughed again; again she cast at him a crimson blossom, maliciously, tantalizingly. "And Paris. That was good, too— differently. The gay crowds on the Bois, and the races at Longchamps, and the little place in the Rue Notre Dame des Champs—and Saint Antoine, in the Norman hills—and the fuss they made over the newly-wedded couple! It was while we were there, if you will remember, Fool," she went on, in voice caressing but words that stung, "on the morning that we first had breakfast under the grape arbor, with its young green leaves and nodding promises of luscious yield, that there came the letter from your wife."

She laughed, long and merrily. He cried, hoarsely:

"Stop! Damn you, stop! You've tortured me enough!"

"Amedee served us that morning," she continued, unmindful; "or was it Francois?—no, Amedee. He spilt the coffee upon the table cloth twice, in his anxiety lest he embarrass us. And when you kissed

me," with a little ripple of mirth, "he looked the other way, covering his lips with his hand. Oh, admirable Amedee! ... The breeze was stirring that morning, Fool—do you remember?—and the dead leaves of yester-year fell about us— so!" She plucked a great handful of crimson petals from her breast and cast them above her head. They fell about him, and about her. "And I dipped sugar in my coffee and fed it to you, and you let me read your wife's letter." Again she laughed.

Through his clenched teeth came a muttered curse.

"It was interesting, drolly interesting.... that letter." she continued.
"She couldn't understand why your mission detained you so long!"

Yet again she laughed, merrily, ringingly. Suddenly she shifted, lithely, the poise of her body.

"Bah! I weary of this, and of you.... But before I go," she leaned far forward, eyes on his, vivid lips curved, bare breast shimmering, "a kiss, My Fool!"

"Why do you come here?" he cried, piteously. "Have you not done enough? Is there no pity in your heart—no sympathy—no human feeling of any kind?"

"I've heard you say so, in other days," she smiled.

"Let me go," he begged. "Haven't you done enough? There is no misery that I have not suffered—no degradation that I have not reached—no depths to which I have not sunk—no dishonor that I have not felt. Great God! What more do you want of me?"

He was a pitiful object, sunken, shrivelled, abject. She looked on him with eyes that revealed only amusement—amusement, and power.

She asked, lightly:

"What more could I want of you? What more have you to give, My Fool?"

"There's a chance for me," he pleaded, hysterically; "a little, pitiful chance. Can't you find in that dead thing you call a heart just one shred of pity that I may have that chance that is held out to me? I don't ask much in return for all that I have given—just to be let alone.... Ah, go! Go! Please, please go!"

He was on his knees now, thin hands raised in beseeching. She looked down on him from where she sat, upon the desk, little feet swinging. She raised delicate, arched brows.

"Anyone would think," she declared, "that I had done wrong by you."

He struggled erect.

"By God, I'll have my chance!" he cried. "I'll have it in spite of you!
Do you hear? Go!"

"In good time, My Fool," she returned, easily. "When you shall have ceased to amuse me."

"You'll go now," he insisted, frenziedly. "Now!"

He stumbled forward, to grasp the white, rounded arms. She caught his wrists, holding him easily.

"You're not so strong as you were, you know," she said, lightly. Suddenly she thrust him from her, reeling. Her eyes flashed; her lips curved, in scorn.

"You sicken me." And then: "You asked me if I had had all I wanted of you. I have, and more. And now I'll go, and leave you to your 'chance!' But not until—"

She had risen, and gone to the great chair. Into it she sank. He was before her.... She leaned forward, eyes heavy lidded, white arms extended, white teeth glowing, white shoulders shimmering. She hissed, sibilantly:

"A kiss, My Fool!"

He turned from her.... Turned half back again....

"No!" he gasped, weakly.... "No."

She hissed again:

"Kiss me, My Fool!"

The scarlet roses at her breast moved a little. Her lips were parted....
Her eyes were on his....

He cried, thickly, agonizedly:

"I'm free of you! Free, I tell you! I'm going back to wife—to child—to home—to honor! I'm free!"

Her lips curved. Her breast heaved. Her arms glowed. And her eyes were on his.... He came a step nearer—another step—yet another.... He was nearer, now.... She leaned back a little, in the great chair....

He was not a man, now. He was a Thing, and that Thing was of her. Hands hung slack, loose, at his sides; jaw drooped; lips were pendulous. Only, in his eyes was that light that she, and she alone, knew how to kindle.... He was hers, soul, and body, and brain....

Then, suddenly, came of the things that are Unknown. Perhaps came to his ears a voice—to his heart an aid unknown.... His hands stiffened a little.... And then he leaped upon her.

She saw; she had half risen.... Back they went over the great chair, his body on hers, his fingers clutching at her rounded throat. For a moment, they writhed. She screamed, once.... Then, suddenly, his twisted fingers relaxed.... His head fell back. His body, inert, rolled from hers, turned again as it struck the chair, and fell, a thing crushed and dead, at her feet....

She rose, breathing hoarsely from between red, parted lips. There were marks upon her throat.... Perhaps, again, she had overestimated her power.... And yet it were not to be sure of this....

Her skirt-hem lay beneath his body. She stooped, lithely, disengaging it. His fingers clutched torn petals of crimson roses.... She looked.... Then vivid lips parted, and she laughed, a little.

Of that which is known, she knew but little; of that which is unknown, she knew much. Perhaps it is a small thing, after all, to wreck a life.

* * * * *

When they came back, they found him there, alone. He lay prone, on the rug, before the great chair. The moonlight was upon his face; which was not well. Crimson petals, like drops of blood, were upon it; and the redness was crushed between his clutching fingers.

Muriel did not see; for the friend such as few men may ever hope to have and, having, may pray to keep, had thrust the child behind him.

For a long, long time they stood there.... Then slowly, the woman that had been wife turned—her head sunk forward.... She had suffered much, and yet there was in her still the power to suffer; but it was now the suffering of pity—of utter, utter pity.... Head sunk forward, she reeled a little. The man, standing beside her, caught her in strong arm, that she might not fall.... For a tiny moment she rested there—the only rest that she had known since It had come into her life. And who shall say that she was wrong? or he?

Side by side they stood, and gazed upon their dead. They held the little child that she might not see.... Then slowly they turned, and left.... And in the end, perhaps, came to them of God the happiness that they deserved from Him. Perhaps, even it was a happiness refined of the suffering through which they both had passed; for, to know great happiness one must have known great sorrow.

Upon the Altar of Things are made, oft-times, strange sacrifices— sacrifices that we cannot understand, made in a way that we do not comprehend. For God has shown us, even the wisest of us, but little of the world in which we live.

THE END.

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