

The Restless Sex

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS



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BOY

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But the restless sex remained restless; the invention of the sign of Mars ([Mars symbol]), far from bringing content, merely increased the capacity of the sex for fidgeting. And its insatiate curiosity concerning its own handiwork increased.

This handiwork, however, fulfilled rather casually the purpose of its inventor, and devoted the most of its time to the invention of gods, endowing the most powerful of them with all its own cowardice, vanity, intolerance and ferocity.

"He made us," they explained with a modesty attributable only to forgetfulness.

"Believe in him or he'll damn you. And if he doesn't, we will!" they shouted to one another. And appointed representatives of various denominations to deal exclusively in damnation.

Cede Deo! And so, in conformity with the edict of this man-created creator, about a decade before the Great Administration began, a little girl was born.

She should not have been born, because she was not wanted, being merely the by-product of an itinerant actor—Harry Quest, juveniles—stimulated to casual procreation by idleness, whiskey, and phthisis.

The other partner in this shiftless affair was an uneducated and very young girl named Conway, who tinted photographs for a Utica photographer while daylight lasted, and doubled her small salary by doing fancy skating at a local "Ice Palace" in the evenings. So it is very plain that the by-product of this partnership hadn't much chance in the world which awaited her; for, being neither expected nor desired, and, moreover, being already a prenatal heiress to obscure, unknown traits scarcely as yet even developed in the pair responsible for her advent on earth, what she might turn into must remain a problem to be solved by time alone.

Harry Quest, the father of this unborn baby, was an actor. Without marked talent and totally without morals, but well educated and of agreeable manners, he was a natural born swindler, not only of others but of himself. In other words, an optimist.

His father, the Reverend Anthony Quest, retired, was celebrated for his wealth, his library, and his amazing and heartless parsimony. And his morals. No wonder he had grimly kicked out his only son who had none.

The parents of the mother of this little child not yet born, lived in Utica, over a stationery and toy shop which they kept. Patrick Conway was the man's name. He had a pension for being injured on the railway, and sat in a peculiarly constructed wheeled chair, moving himself about by pushing the rubber-tired wheels with both hands and steering with his remaining foot.

He had married a woman rather older than himself, named Jessie Grismer, a school teacher living in Herkimer.

To Utica drifted young Quest, equipped only with the remains of one lung, and out of a job as usual. At the local rink he picked up Laura Conway, after a mindless flirtation, and ultimately went to board with her family over the stationery shop.

So the affair in question was a case of propinquity as much as anything, and was consummated with all the detached irresponsibility of two sparrows.

However, Quest, willing now to be supported, married the girl without protest. She continued to tint photographs and skate as long as she was able to be about; he loafed in front of theatres and hotels, with a quarter in change in his pockets, but always came back to meals. On sunny afternoons, when he felt well, he strolled about the residence section or reposed in his room waiting, probably, for Opportunity to knock and enter.

But nothing came except the baby.

About that time, too, both lungs being in bad condition, young Quest began those various and exhaustive experiments in narcotics, which sooner or later interest such men. And he finally discovered heroin. Finding it an agreeable road to hell, the symptomatic characteristics of an addict presently began to develop in him, and he induced his young wife to share the pleasures of his pharmaceutical discovery.

They and their baby continued to encumber the apartment for a year or two before the old people died—of weariness perhaps, perhaps of old age—or grief—or some similar disease so fatal to the aged.

Anyway, they died, and there remained nothing in the estate not subject to creditors. And, as tinted photographs had gone out of fashion even in Utica, and as the advent of moving pictures was beginning to kill vaudeville everywhere except in New York, the ever-provincial, thither the Quest family drifted. And there, through the next few years, they sifted downward through stratum after stratum of the metropolitan purlieus, always toward some darker substratum—always a little lower.

The childishly attractive mother, in blue velvet and white cat's fur, still did fancy skating at rink and Hippodrome. The father sometimes sat dazed and coughing in the chilly waiting rooms of theatrical agencies. Fortified by drugs and by a shabby fur overcoat, he sometimes managed to make the rounds in pleasant weather; and continued to die rather slowly, considering his physical condition.

But his father, who had so long ago disowned him—the Reverend Anthony Quest—being in perfect moral condition, caught a slight cold in his large, warm library, and died of pneumonia in forty-eight hours—a frightful example of earthly injustice, doubtless made all right in Heaven.

Young Quest, forbidden the presence for years, came skulking around after a while with a Jew lawyer, only to find that his one living relative, a predatory aunt, had assimilated everything and was perfectly qualified to keep it under the terms of his father's will.

Her attorneys made short work of the shyster. She herself, many times a victim to her nephew's deceit in former years, and once having stood between him and prison concerning the matter of a signature for thousands of dollars—the said signature not being hers but by her recognised for the miserable young man's sake—this formidable and acidulous old lady wrote to her nephew in reply to a letter of his:

You always were a liar. I do not believe you are married. I do not believe you have a baby. I send you—not a cheque, because you'd probably raise it—but enough money to start you properly.

Keep away from me. You are what you are partly through your father's failure to do his duty by you. An optimist taken at birth and patiently trained can be saved. Nobody saved you; you were merely punished. And you, naturally, became a swindler.

But I can't help that now. It's too late. I can only send you money. And if it's true you have a child, for God's sake take her in time or she'll turn into what you are.

And *that* is why I send you any money at all—on the remote chance that you are not lying. Keep away from me, Harry.

ROSALINDA QUEST.

So he did not trouble her, he knew her of old; and besides he was too ill, too dazed with drugs to bother with such things.

He lost every penny of the money in Quint's gambling house within a month. So the Quest family, father, mother and little daughter sifted through the wide, coarse meshes of the very last social stratum that same winter, and landed on the ultimate mundane dump heap.

Quest now lay all day across a broken iron bed, sometimes stupefied, sometimes violent; his wife, dismissed from the Hippodrome for flagrant cause, now picked up an intermittent living and other things in an east-side rink. The child still remained about, somewhere, anywhere—a dirty, ragged, bruised, furtive little thing, long accustomed to extremes of maudlin demonstration and drug-crazed cruelty, frightened witness of dreadful altercations and of more dreadful reconciliations, yet still more stunned than awakened, more undeveloped than precocious, as though the steady accumulation of domestic horrors had checked mental growth rather than sharpened her wits with cynicism and undesirable knowledge.

Not yet had her environment distorted and tainted her speech, for her father had been an educated man, and what was left of him still employed grammatical English, often correcting the nasal, up-state vocabulary of the mother—the beginning of many a terrible quarrel.

So the child skulked about, alternately ignored or whined over, cursed or caressed, petted or beaten, sometimes into insensibility.

Otherwise she followed them about instinctively, like a crippled kitten.

Then there came one stifling night in that earthly hell called a New York tenement, when little Stephanie Quest, tortured by prickly heat, gasping for the relief which the western lightning promised, crept out to the fire escape and lay there gasping like a minnow.

Fate, lurking in the reeking room behind her, where her drugged parents lay in merciful stupor, unloosed a sudden breeze from the thunderous west, which blew the

door shut with a crash. It did not awaken the man. But, among other things, it did jar loose a worn-out gas jet.... That was the verdict, anyway.

Pluris est oculatus testis unus quam auriti decem.

But, as always, the Most High remained silent, offering no testimony to the contrary.

This episode in the career of Stephanie Quest happened in the days of the Great Administration, an administration not great in the sense of material national prosperity, great only in spirit and in things of the mind and soul.

Even the carpenter, Albrecht Schmidt, across the hallway in the tenement, rose to the level of some unexplored spiritual stratum, for he had a wife and five children and only his wages, and he did not work every week.

"Nein," he said, when approached for contributions toward the funeral, "I haff no money for dead people. I don't giff, I don't lend. Vat it iss dot Shakespeare says? Don't neffer borrow und don't neffer lend noddings.... But I tell you what I do! I take dot leedle child!"

The slim, emaciated child, frightened white, had flattened herself against the dirty wall of the hallway to let the policemen and ambulance surgeon pass.

The trampling, staring inmates of the tenement crowded the stairs, a stench of cabbage and of gas possessed the place.

The carpenter's wife, a string around her shapeless middle, and looking as though she might add to her progeny at any minute, came to the door of her two-room kennel.

"Poor little Stephanie," she said, "you come right in and make you'self at home along of us!"

And, as the child did not stir, seemingly frozen there against the stained and battered wall, the carpenter said:

"*Du!* Stephanie! Hey you, Steve! Come home und get you some breakfast right away quick!"

"Is that their kid?" inquired a policeman coming out of the place of death and wiping the sweat from his face.

"Sure. I take her in."

"Well, you'll have to fix that matter later——"

"I fix it now. I take dot little Steve for mine——"

The policeman yawned over the note book in which he was writing.

"It ain't done that way, I'm tellin' you! Well, all *right!* You can keep her until the thing is fixed up——" He went on writing.

The carpenter strode over to the child; his blond hair bristled, his beard was fearsome and like an ogre's. But his voice trembled with Teuton sentiment.

"You got a new mamma, Steve!" he rumbled. "Now, you run in und cry mit her so much as you like." He pulled the little girl gently toward his rooms; the morbid crowd murmured on the stairs at the sight of the child of suicides.

"Mamma, here iss our little Steve alretty!" growled Schmidt. "Now, py Gott! I got to go to my job! A hellofa business iss it! Schade—immer—schade! Another mouth to feed, py Gott!"

FOREWORD

On the Christmas-tide train which carried homeward those Saint James schoolboys who resided in or near New York, Cleland Junior sat chattering with his comrades in a drawing-room car entirely devoted to the Saint James boys, and resounding with the racket of their interminable gossip and laughter.

The last number of their school paper had come out on the morning of their departure for Christmas holidays at home; every boy had a copy and was trying to read it aloud to his neighbour; shrieks of mirth resounded, high, shrill arguments, hot disputes, shouts of approval or of protest.

"Read this! Say, did you get this!" cried a tall boy named Grismer. "Jim Cleland wrote it! What do you know about our own pet novelist——"

"*Shut up!*" retorted Cleland Junior, blushing and abashed by accusation of authorship.

"He wrote it all right!" repeated Grismer exultantly. "Oh, girls! Just listen to this mush about the birds and the bees and the bright blue sky——"

"Jim, you're all right! That's the stuff!" shouted another. "The girl in the story's a peach, and the battle scene is great!"

"Say, Jim, where do you get your battle stuff?" inquired another lad respectfully.

"Out of the papers, of course," replied Cleland Junior. "All you have to do is to read 'em, and you can think out the way it really looks."

The only master in the car, a young Harvard graduate, got up from his revolving chair and came over to Cleland Junior.

The boy rose immediately, standing slender and handsome in the dark suit of mourning which he still wore after two years.

"Sit down, Jim," said Grayson, the master, seating himself on the arm of the boy's chair. And, as the boy diffidently resumed his seat: "Nice little story of yours, this. Just finished it. Co you still think of making writing your profession?"

"I'd like to, sir."

"Many are called, you know," remarked the master with a smile.

"I know, sir. I shall have to take my chance."

Phil Grayson, baseball idol of the Saint James boys, and himself guilty of several delicate verses in the Century and Scribner's, sat on the padded arm of the revolving chair and touched his slight moustache thoughtfully.

"One's profession, Jim, ought to be one's ruling passion. To choose a profession, choose what you most care to do in your leisure moments. That should be your business in life."

The boy said:

"I like about everything, Mr. Grayson, but I think I had rather write than anything else."

John Belter, a rotund youth, listening and drawing caricatures on the back of the school paper, suggested that perhaps Cleland Junior was destined to write the Great American Novel.

Grayson said pleasantly:

"It was the great American ass who first made inquiries concerning the Great American Novel."

"Oh, what a knock!" shouted Oswald Grismer, delighted.

But young Belter joined in the roars of laughter, undisturbed, saying very coolly:

"Do you mean, sir, that the Great American Novel will never be written, or that it has already been written several times, or that there isn't any such thing?"

"I mean all three, Jack," explained Grayson, smiling. "Let me see that caricature you have been so busy over."

"It's—it's *you*, sir."

"What of it?" retorted the young master. "Do you think I can't laugh at myself?"

He took the paper so reluctantly tendered:

"Jack, you *are* a terror! You young rascal, you've made me look like a wax-faced clothing dummy!"

"Tribute to your faultless apparel, sir, and equally faultless features——"

A shriek of laughter from the boys who had crowded around to see; Grayson himself laughing unfeignedly and long; then the babel of eager, boyish voices again, loud, emphatic, merciless in discussion of the theme of the moment.

Into the swaying car and down the aisle came a negro in spotless white, repeating invitingly:

"First call for luncheon, gentlemen! Luncheon served in the dining car forward!"

His agreeable voice was drowned in the cheering of three dozen famished boys, stampeding.

Cleland Junior came last with the master.

"I hope you'll have a happy holiday, Jim," said Grayson, with quiet cordiality.

"I'm crazy to see father," said the boy. "I'm sure I'll have a good time."

At the vestibule he stepped aside, but the master bade him precede him.

And as the fair, slender boy passed out into the forward car, the breeze ruffling his blond hair, and his brown eyes still smiling with the anticipation of home coming, he passed Fate, Chance, and Destiny, whispering together in the corner of the platform. But the boy could not see them; could not know that they were discussing him.

CHAPTER I

An average New York house on a side street in winter is a dark affair; daylight comes reluctantly and late into the city; the south side of a street catches the first winter sun rays when there are any; the north side remains shadowy and chilly.

Cleland Senior's old-fashioned house stood on the north side of 80th Street; and on the last morning of Cleland Junior's Christmas vacation, while the first bars of sunshine fell across the brown stone façades on the opposite side of the street, the Clelands' breakfast room still remained dim, bathed in the silvery gray dusk of morning.

Father and son had finished breakfast, but Cleland Senior, whose other names were John and William, had not yet lighted the cigar which he held between thumb and forefinger and contemplated in portentous silence. Nor had he opened the morning paper to read paragraphs of interest to Cleland Junior, comment upon them, and encourage discussion, as was his wont when his son happened to be home from school.

The house was one of those twenty-foot brown stone houses—architecturally featureless—which was all there was to New York architecture fifty years ago.

But John William Cleland's dead wife had managed to make a gem of the interior, and the breakfast room on the second floor front, once his wife's bedroom, was charming with its lovely early American furniture and silver, and its mellow, old-time prints in colour.

Cleland Junior continued to look rather soberly at the familiar pictures, now, as he sat in silence opposite his father, his heart of a boy oppressed by the approaching parting.

"So you think you'll make writing a profession, Jim?" repeated John Cleland, not removing his eyes from the cigar he was turning over and over.

"Yes, father."

"All right. Then a general education is the thing, and Harvard the place—unless you prefer another university."

"The fellows are going to Harvard—most of them," said the boy.

"A boy usually desires to go where his school friends go.... It's all right, Jim."

Cleland Junior's fresh, smooth face of a school boy had been slowly growing more and more solemn. Sometimes he looked at the prints on the wall; sometimes he glanced across the table at his father, who still sat absently turning over and over the unlighted cigar between his fingers. The approaching separation was weighing on them both. That, and the empty third chair by the bay window, inclined them to caution in speech, lest memory strike them suddenly, deep and unawares, and their voices betray their men's hearts to each other—which is not an inclination between men.

Cleland Senior glanced involuntarily from the empty chair to the table, where, as always, a third place had been laid by Meachem, and, as always, a fresh flower lay beside the service plate.

No matter what the occasion, under all circumstances and invariably Meachem laid a fresh blossom of some sort beside the place which nobody used.

Cleland Senior gazed at the frail cluster of frisia in silence.

Through the second floor hallway landing, in the library beyond, the boy could see his suitcase, and, lying against it, his hockey stick. Cleland Senior's preoccupied glance also, at intervals, reverted to these two significant objects. Presently he got up and walked out into the little library, followed in silence by Cleland Junior.

There was a very tall clock in that room, which had been made by one of the Willards many years before the elder Cleland's birth; but it ticked now as aggressively and bumpiously as though it were brand new.

The father wandered about for a while, perhaps with the vague idea of finding a match for his cigar; the son's clear gaze followed his father's restless movements until the clock struck the half hour.

"Father?"

"Yes, dear—yes, old chap?"—with forced carelessness which deceived neither.

"It's half past nine."

"All right, Jim—any time you're ready."

"I hate to go back and leave you all alone here!" broke out the boy impulsively.

It was a moment of painful tension.

Cleland Senior did not reply; and the boy, conscious of the emotion which his voice had betrayed, and suddenly shy about it, turned his head and gazed out into the back yard.

Father and son still wore mourning; the black garments made the boy's hair and skin seem fairer than they really were—as fair as his dead mother's.

When Cleland Senior concluded that he was able to speak in a perfectly casual and steady voice, he said:

"Have you had a pretty good holiday, Jim?"

"Fine, father!"

"That's good. That's as it should be. We've enjoyed a pretty good time together, my son; haven't we?"

"Great! It was a dandy vacation!"

There came another silence. On the boy's face lingered a slight retrospective smile, as he mentally reviewed the two weeks now ending with the impending departure for school. Certainly he had had a splendid time. His father had engineered all sorts of parties and amusements for him—schoolboy gatherings at the Ice Rink; luncheons and little dances in their own home, to which school comrades and children of old friends were bidden; trips to the Bronx, to the Aquarium, to the Natural History Museum; wonderful evenings at home together.

The boy had gone with his father to see the "Wizard of Oz," to see Nazimova in "The Comet"—a doubtful experiment, but in line with theories of Cleland Senior—to see "The Fall of Port Arthur" at the Hippodrome; to hear Calvé at the Opera.

Together they had strolled on Fifth Avenue, viewed the progress of the new marble tower then being built on Madison Square, had lunched together at Delmonico's, dined at Sherry's, motored through all the parks, visited Governor's Island and the Navy Yard—the latter rendezvous somewhat empty of interest since the great battle fleet had started on its pacific voyage around the globe.

Always they had been together since the boy returned from Saint James school for the Christmas holidays; and Cleland Senior had striven to fill every waking hour of his son's day with something pleasant to be remembered.

Always at breakfast he had read aloud the items of interest—news concerning President Roosevelt—the boy's hero—and his administration; Governor Hughes and *his* administration; the cumbersome coming of Mr. Taft from distant climes; local squabbles concerning projected subways. All that an intelligent and growing boy ought to know and begin to think about, Cleland Senior read aloud at the breakfast table—for this reason, and also to fill in every minute with pleasant interest lest the dear grief, now two years old, and yet forever fresh, creep in between words and threaten the silences between them with sudden tears.

But two years is a long, long time in the life of the young—in the life of a fourteen-year-old boy; and yet, the delicate shadow of his mother still often dimmed for him the sunny sparkle of the winter's holiday. It fell across his clear young eyes now, where he sat thinking, and made them sombre and a deeper brown.

For he was going back to boarding school; and old memories were uneasily astir again; and Cleland Senior saw the shadow on the boy's face; understood; but now chose to remain silent, not intervening.

So memory gently enveloped them both, leaving them very still together, there in the library.

For the boy's mother had been so intimately associated with preparations for returning to school in those blessed days which already had begun to seem distant and a little unreal to Cleland Junior—so tenderly and vitally a part of them—that now, when the old pain, the loneliness, the eternal desire for her was again possessing father and son in the imminence of familiar departure, Cleland Senior let it come to the boy, not caring to avert it.

Thinking of the same thing, both sat gazing into the back yard. There was a cat on the whitewashed fence. Lizzie, the laundress—probably the last of the race of old-time family laundresses—stood bare-armed in the cold, pinning damp clothing to the lines, her Irish mouth full of wooden clothes-pins, her parboiled arms steaming.

At length Cleland Senior's glance fell again upon the tall clock. He swallowed nothing, stared grimly at the painted dial where a ship circumnavigated the sun, then squaring his big shoulders he rose with decision.

The boy got up too.

In the front hall they assisted each other with overcoats; the little, withered butler took the boy's luggage down the brown-stone steps to the car. A moment later father and son were spinning along Fifth Avenue toward Forty-second Street.

As usual, this ordeal of departure forced John Cleland to an unnatural, off-hand gaiety at the crisis, as though the parting amounted to nothing.

"Going to be a good kid in school, Jim?" he asked, casually humorous.

The boy nodded and smiled.

"That's right. And, Jim, stick to your Algebra, no matter how you hate it. I hated it too.... Going to get on your class hockey team?"

"I'll do my best."

"Right. Try for the ball team, too. And, Jim?"

"Yes, father?"

"You're all right so far. You know what's good and what's bad."

"Yes, sir."

"No matter what happens, you can always come to me. You thoroughly understand that."

"Yes, father."

"You've never known what it is to be afraid of me, have you?"

The boy smiled broadly; said no.

"Never be afraid of me, Jim. That's one thing I couldn't stand. I'm always here. All I'm here on earth for is you! Do you really understand me?"

"Yes, father."

Red-capped porter, father and son halted near the crowded train gate inside the vast railroad station.

Cleland Senior said briskly:

"Good-bye, old chap. See you at Easter. Good luck! Send me anything you write in the way of verses and stories."

Their clasped hands fell apart; the boy went through the gate, followed by his porter and by numerous respectable and negligible travelling citizens, male and female, bound for destinations doubtless interesting to them. To John Cleland they were merely mechanically moving impedimenta which obscured the retreating figure of his only son and irritated him to that extent. And when the schoolboy cap of that only son disappeared, engulfed in the crowd, John Cleland went back to his car, back to his empty, old-fashioned brownstone house, seated himself in the library that his wife had made lovely, and picked up the *Times*, which he had not read aloud at breakfast.

He had been sitting there more than an hour before he thought of reading the paper so rigidly spread across his knees. But he was not interested in what he read. The battle fleet, it seemed, was preparing to sail from Port-of-Spain; Mr. Taft was preparing to launch his ponderous candidacy at the fat head of the Republican party; a

woman had been murdered in the Newark marshes; the subway muddle threatened to become more muddled; somebody desired to motor from New York to Paris; President Roosevelt and Mr. Cortelyou had been in consultation about something or other; German newspapers accused the United States of wasting its natural resources; Scotti was singing *Scarpia* in "Tosca"; a new music hall had been built in the Bronx—

Cleland Senior laid the paper aside, stared at the pale winter sunshine on the back fence till things suddenly blurred, then he resumed his paper, sharply, and gazed hard at the print until his dead wife's smiling eyes faded from the page.

But in the paper there seemed nothing to hold his attention. He turned to the editorials, then to the last page. This, he noticed, was still entirely devoted to the "Hundred Neediest Cases"—the yearly Christmastide appeal in behalf of specific examples of extreme distress. The United Charities Organization of the Metropolitan district always made this appeal every year.

Now, Cleland Senior had already sent various sums to that particular charity; and his eyes followed rather listlessly the paragraphs describing certain cases which still were totally unrelieved or only partially aided by charitable subscriptions. He read on as a man reads whose heart is still sore within him—not without a certain half irritable sense of sympathy, perhaps, but with an interest still dulled by the oppression which separation from his son always brought.

And still his preoccupied mind plodded on as he glanced over the several paragraphs of appeal, and after a while he yawned, wondering listlessly that such pitiable cases of need had not been relieved by somebody among the five million who so easily could give the trifles desired. For example:

"Case No. 47. A young man, 25, hopelessly crippled and bedridden, could learn to do useful work, sufficient to support him, if \$25 for equipment were sent to the United Charities office."

Contributors were asked to mention Case No. 47 when sending cheques for relief.

He read on mechanically:

"Case No. 108. This case has been partly relieved through contributions, but thirty dollars are still required. Otherwise, these two aged and helpless gentlewomen must lose their humble little home and an institution will have to take care of them. Neither one has many more years to live. A trifling aid, now, means that the few remaining days left to these old people will be tranquil days, free from the dread of separation and destitution."

"Case 113. The father, consumptive and unable to work; the mother still weak from childbirth; the only other wage-earner a daughter aged sixteen, under arrest; four little children dependent. Seventy dollars will tide them over until the mother can recover and resume her wage-earning, which, with the daughter's assistance, will be sufficient to keep the family together. Three of the children are defectives; the oldest sister, a cash-girl, has been arrested and held as a witness for attending, at her

mother's request, a clinic conducted by people advocating birth-control; and the three dollars a week which she brought to the family has been stopped indefinitely."

"Case 119. For this case no money at all has been received so far. It is the case of a little child, Stephanie Quest, left an orphan by the death or suicide of both drug-addicted parents, and taken into the family of a kindly German carpenter two years ago. It is the first permanent shelter the child has ever known, the first kindness ever offered her, the first time she has ever had sufficient nourishment in all her eleven years of life. Now she is in danger of losing the only home she has ever had. Stephanie is a pretty, delicate, winsome and engaging little creature of eleven, whose only experience with life had been savage cruelty, gross neglect, filth and immemorial starvation until the carpenter took her into his own too numerous family, and his wife cared for her as though she were their own child.

"But they have five children of their own, and the wife is soon to have another baby. Low wages, irregular employment, the constantly increasing cost of living, now make it impossible for them to feed and clothe an extra child.

"They are fond of the little girl; they are willing to keep and care for her if fifty dollars could be contributed toward her support. But if this sum be not forthcoming, little Stephanie will have to go to an institution.

"The child is now physically healthy. She is of a winning personality, but somewhat impulsive, unruly, and wilful at times; and it would be far better for her future welfare to continue to live with these sober, kindly, honest people who love her, than to be sent to an orphanage."

"Case No. 123. A very old man, desperately poor and ill and entirely——"

John Cleland dropped the paper suddenly across his knees. A fierce distaste for suffering, an abrupt disinclination for such details checked further perusal.

"Damnation!" he muttered, fumbling for another cigar.

His charities already had been attended to for the year. That portion of his income devoted to such things was now entirely used up. But he remained uneasily aware that the portion reserved for further acquisition of Americana—books, prints, pictures, early American silver, porcelains, furniture, was still intact for the new year now beginning.

That was his only refuge from loneliness and the ever-living grief—the plodding hunt for such things and the study connected with this pursuit. Except for his son—his ruling passion—he had no other interest, now that his wife was dead—nothing that particularly mattered to him in life except this collecting of Americana.

And now his son had gone away again. The day had to be filled—filled rather quickly, too; for the parting still hurt cruelly, and with a dull persistence that he had not yet shaken off. He must busy himself with something. He'd go out again presently, and mouse about among musty stacks of furniture "in the rough." Then he'd prowl through auction rooms and screw a jeweller's glass into his right eye and pore over mezzotints.

He allowed himself just so much to spend on Americana; just so much to spend on his establishment, so much to invest, so much to give to charity——

"Damnation!" he repeated aloud.

It was the last morning of the exhibition at the Christensen Galleries of early American furniture. That afternoon the sale was to begin. He had not had time for preliminary investigation. He realized the importance of the collection; knew that his friends would be there in force; and hated the thought of losing such a chance.

Turning the leaves of his newspaper for the advertisement, he found himself again confronted by the columns containing the dreary "Hundred Neediest Cases." And against every inclination he re-read the details of Case 119.

Odd, he thought to himself angrily, that there was nobody in the city to contribute the few dollars necessary to this little girl. The case in question required only fifty dollars. Fifty dollars meant a home, possibly moral salvation, to this child with her winning disposition and unruly ways.

He read the details again, more irritated than ever, yet grimly interested to note that, as usual, it is the very poor with many burdens who help the poor. This carpenter, living probably in a tenement, with a wife, an unborn baby, and a herd of squalling children to support, had still found room for another little waif, whose drug-sodden parents had been kind to her only by dying.

John Cleland turned the page, searched for the advertisement of the Christensen Galleries, discovered it, read it carefully. There were some fine old prints advertised to be sold. His hated rivals would be there—beloved friends yet hated rivals in the endless battle for bargains in antiquities.

When he got into his car a few minutes later, he told the chauffeur to drive to Christensen's and drive fast. Halfway there, he signalled and spoke through the tube:

"Where is the United Charities Building? *Where?* Well, drive there first."

"Damn!" he muttered, readjusting himself in the corner under the lynx robe.

CHAPTER II

"Would you care to go there and see the child for yourself, Mr. Cleland? A few moments might give you a much clearer idea of her than all that I have told you," suggested the capable young woman to whom he had been turned over in that vast labyrinth of offices tenemented by the "United Charities Organizations of Manhattan and the Four Boroughs, Inc."

John Cleland signed the cheque which he had filled in, laid it on the desk, closed his cheque-book, and shook his head.

"I'm a busy man," he said briefly.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I *wish* you had time to see her for a moment. You may obtain permission through the Manhattan Charities Concern, a separate organization, which turns over certain cases to the excellent child-placing agency connected with our corporation."

"Thank you; I haven't time."

"Mr. Chiltern Grismer would be the best man to see—if you had time."

"Thank you."

There was a chilly silence; Cleland stood frowning at space, wrapped in gloomy preoccupation.

"But," added the capable young woman, wistfully, "if you are so busy that you have no time to bother with this case personally——"

"I *have* time," snapped Cleland, turning red. For the man was burdened with the inconvenient honesty of his race—a sort of tactless truthfulness which characterized all Clelands. He said:

"When I informed you that I'm a busy man, I evidently but unintentionally misled you. I'm not in business. I *have* time. I simply don't wish to go into the slums to see somebody's perfectly strange offspring."

The amazed young woman listened, hesitated, then threw back her pretty head and laughed:

"Mr. Cleland, your frankness is most refreshing! Certainly there is no necessity for you to go if you don't wish to. The little girl will be *most* grateful to you for this generous cheque, and happy to be relieved of the haunting terror that has made her almost ill at the prospect of an orphanage. The child will be beside herself with joy when she gets word from us that she need not lose the only home and the only friends she has ever known. Thank you—for little Stephanie Quest."

"What did the *other* people do to her?" inquired John Cleland, buttoning his gloves and still scowling absently at nothing.

"What people?"

"The ones who—her parents, I mean. What was it they did to her?"

"They were dreadfully inhuman——"

"*What* did they do to the child? Do you know?"

"Yes, I know, Mr. Cleland. They beat her mercilessly when they happened to be crazed by drugs; they neglected her when sober. The little thing was a mass of cuts and sores and bruises when we investigated her case; two of her ribs had been broken, somehow or other, and were not yet healed——"

"Oh, Lord!" he interrupted sharply. "That's enough of such devilish detail!—— I beg your pardon, but such things—annoy me. Also I've some business that's waiting—or pleasure, whichever you choose to call it——" He glanced at his watch, thinking of the exhibition at Christensen's, and the several rival and hawk-like amateurs who certainly would be prowling around there, deriding him for his absence and looking for loot.

"Where does that child live?" he added carelessly, buttoning his overcoat.

The capable young woman, who had been regarding him with suppressed amusement, wrote out the address on a pad, tore off the leaf, and handed it to him.

"—In case you ever become curious to see little Stephanie Quest, whom you have aided so generously——" she explained.

Cleland, recollecting with increasing annoyance that he had three hundred dollars less to waste on Christensen than he had that morning, muttered the polite formality of leave-taking required of him, and bowed himself out, carrying the slip of paper in his gloved fingers, extended as though he were looking for a place to drop it.

Down in the street, where his car stood, the sidewalks were slowly whitening under leisurely falling snowflakes. The asphalt already was a slippery mess.

"Where's *that*!" he demanded peevishly, shoving the slip of paper at his chauffeur. "Do you know?"

"I can find it, sir."

"All right," snapped John Cleland.

He stepped into the little limousine and settled back with a grunt. Then he hunched himself up in the corner and perked the fur robe over his knees, muttering. Thoughts of his wife, of his son, had been heavily persistent that morning. Never before had he felt actually old—he was only fifty-odd. Never before had he felt himself so alone, so utterly solitary. Never had he so needed the comradeship of his only son.

He had relapsed into a sort of grim, unhappy lethargy, haunted by memories of his son's baby days, when the car stopped in the tenement-lined street, swarming with push-carts and children.

The damp, rank stench of the unwashed smote him as he stepped out and entered the dirty hallway, set with bells and letter boxes and littered with *débris* and filthy melting snow.

The place was certainly vile enough. A deformed woman with sore eyes directed him to the floor where the Schmidt family lived. On the landing he stumbled over several infants who were playing affectionately with a dead cat—probably the first substitute for a doll they had ever possessed. A fight in some room on the second floor

arrested his attention, and he halted, alert and undecided, when the dim hallway resounded with screams of murder.

But a slatternly young woman who was passing explained very coolly that it was only "thim Cassidys mixing it"; and she went her way down stairs with her cracked pitcher, and he continued upward.

"Schmidt? In there," replied a small boy to his inquiry; and resumed his game of ball against the cracked plaster wall of the passage.

Answering his knock, a shapeless woman opened the door.

"Mrs. Schmidt?"

"Yes, sir,"—retying the string which alone kept up her skirt.

He explained briefly who he was, where he had been, what he had done through the United Charities for the child, Stephanie.

"I'd like to take a look at her," he added, "if it's perfectly convenient."

Mrs. Schmidt began to cry:

"*Ex-cuse me, sir; I'm so glad we can keep her. Albert has all he can do for our own kids—but the poor little thing!—it seemed hard to send her away to a Home—*" She gouged out the tears abruptly with the back of a red, water-soaked hand.

"Steve! Here's a kind gentleman come to see you. Dry your hands, dearie, and come and thank him."

A grey-eyed child appeared—one of those slender little shapes, graceful in every unconscious movement of head and limbs. She was drying her thin red fingers on a bit of rag as she came forward, the steam of the wash-boiler still rising from her bare arms.

A loud, continuous noise arose in the further room, as though it were full of birds and animals fighting.

For a moment the tension of inquiry and embarrassment between the three endured in silence; then an odd, hot flush seemed to envelop the heart of Cleland Senior—and something tense within his brain loosened, flooding his entire being with infinite relief. The man had been starving for a child; that was all. He had suddenly found her. But he didn't realize it even now.

There was a shaky chair in the exceedingly clean but wretchedly furnished room. Cleland Senior went over and seated himself gingerly.

"Well, Steve?" he said with a pleasant, humourous smile. But his voice was not quite steady.

"Thank the good, kind gentleman!" burst out Mrs. Schmidt, beginning to sob again, and to swab the welling tears with the mottled backs of both fists. "You're going to stay with us, dearie. They ain't no policeman coming to take you to no institoot for orphan little girls! The good, kind gentleman has give the money for it. Go down onto your knees and thank him, Steve——!"

"Are you really going to *keep* me?" faltered the child. "Is it *true*?"

"Yes, it's true, dearie. Don't go a-kissing me! Go and thank the good, kind——"

"Let me talk to the child alone," interrupted Cleland drily. "And shut the door, please!"—glancing into the farther room where a clothes-boiler steamed, onions were frying, five yelling children swarmed over every inch of furniture, a baby made apocryphal remarks from a home-made cradle, and a canary bird sang shrilly and incessantly.

Mrs. Schmidt retired, sobbing, extolling the goodness and kindness of John Cleland, who endured it with patience until the closed door shut out eulogies, yells, canary and onions.

Then he said:

"Steve, you need not thank me. Just shake hands with me. Will you? I—I like children."

The little girl, whose head was still turned toward the closed door behind which had disappeared the only woman who had ever been consistently kind to her, now looked around at this large, strange man in his fur-lined coat, who sat there smiling at her in such friendly fashion.

And slowly, timidly, over the child's face the faintest of smiles crept in delicate response to his advances. Yet still in the wonderful grey eyes there remained that heart-rending expression of fearful inquiry which haunts the gaze of children who have been cruelly used.

"Is your name Stephanie?"

"Yes, sir."

"Stephanie Quest?"

"Yes, sir."

"What shall I call you? Steve?"

"Yes, sir," winningly grave.

"All right, then. Steve, will you shake hands?"

The child laid her thin, red, water-marred fingers in his gloved hand. He retained them, and drew her nearer.

"You've had a rather tough deal, Steve, haven't you?"

The child was silent, standing with head lowered, her bronzed brown hair hanging and shadowing shoulders and face.

"Do you go to school, Steve?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not to-day?"

"No, sir. It's Saturday."

"Oh, yes. I forgot. What do you learn in school?"

"Things—writing—reading."

"Do you like school?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you like best?"

"Dancing."

"Do they teach *that*? What kind of dancing do you learn to do?"

"Fancy dancing—folk-dances. And I like the little plays that teacher gets up for us."

"Do you like any other of your studies?" he asked drily.

"Droring."

"Drawing?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, flushing painfully.

"Oh. So they teach you to draw? Who instructs you?"

"Miss Crowe. She comes every week. We copy picture cards and things."

"So you like to draw, Steve," nodded Cleland absently, thinking of his only son, who liked to write, and who, God willing, would have every chance to develop his bent in life. Then, still thinking of his only son, he looked up into the grey eyes of this little stranger.

As fate would have it, she smiled at him. And, looking at her in silence he felt the child-hunger gnawing in his heart—felt it, and for the first time, vaguely surmised what it really was that had so long ailed him.

But the idea, of course, seemed hopeless, impossible! It was not fair to his only son. Everything that he had was his son's—everything he had to give—care, sympathy, love, worldly possessions. These belonged to his son alone.

"Are you happy here with these kind people, Steve?" he asked hastily.

"Yes, sir."

But though his conscience should have instantly acquitted him, deep in his lonely heart the child-hunger gnawed, unsatisfied. If only there had been other children of his own—younger ones to play with, to have near him in his solitude, to cuddle, to caress, to fuss over as he and his dead wife had fussed over their only baby!——

"Steve?"

"Sir?"

"You are sure you will be quite happy here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you——" A pause; and again he looked up into the child's face, and again she smiled.

"Steve, I never had a little girl. It's funny, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

A silence.

"Would you like to—to go to a private school?"

The child did not understand. So he told her about such schools and the little girls who went to them. She seemed deeply interested; her grey eyes were clear and seriously intelligent, and very, very intently fixed on him in the effort to follow and understand what he was saying.

He told her about other children who lived amid happy surroundings; what they did, how they were cared for, schooled, brought up; what was expected of them by the

world—what was required by the world from those who had had advantages of a home, of training, of friends, and of an education. He was committing himself with every word, and refused to believe it.

At times he paused to question her, and she always nodded seriously that she understood.

"But this," he added smilingly, "you may not entirely comprehend, Steve; that such children, brought up as I have explained to you, owe the human race a debt which is never cancelled." He was talking to himself now, more than to her; voicing his thoughts; feeling his way toward the expression of a philosophy which he had heretofore only vaguely entertained.

"The hope of the world lies in such children, Steve," he said. "The world has a right to expect service from them. You don't understand, do you?"

Her wonderfully clear eyes were almost beautiful with intelligence as they looked straight into his. Perhaps the child understood more than she herself realized, more than he believed she understood.

"Shall I come to see you again, Steve?"

"Yes, sir, please."

There was a pause. Very gently the slight pressure of his arm, which had crept around her, conveyed to her its wistful meaning; and when she understood she leaned slowly toward him in winning response, and offered her lips with a gravity that captivated him.

"Good-bye, Steve, dear," he said unsteadily. "I'll come to see you again very soon. I surely, surely will come back again to see you, Steve."

Then he put on his hat and went out abruptly—not down town to Christensen's, but back to the United Charities, and, after an hour, from there he went down town to his attorney's, where he spent the entire day under suppressed excitement.

For there were many steps to take and much detail to be attended to before this new and momentous deal could be put through—a transaction concerning a human soul and the measures to be taken to insure its salvage.

CHAPTER III

During the next few weeks John William Cleland's instinct fought a continuous series of combats with his reason.

Instinct, with her powerful allies, loneliness and love, urged the solitary man to rash experiment; reason ridiculed impulse and made it very clear to Cleland that he was a fool.

But instinct had this advantage; she was always awake, whispering to his mind and heart; and reason often fell asleep on guard over his brain.

But when awake, reason laughed at the conspirators, always in ambush to slay him; and carried matters with a high hand, rebuking instinct and frowning upon her allies.

And John Cleland hesitated. He wrote to his only son every day. He strove to find occupation for every minute between the morning awakening in his silent chamber and the melancholy lying down at night.

But always the battle between reason and instinct continued.

Reason had always appealed to Cleland Senior. His parents and later his wife and son had known the only sentimental phenomena which had ever characterized him in his career. Outside of these exceptions, reason had always ruled him. This is usually the case among those who inherit money from forebears who, in turn, have been accustomed to inherit and hand down a moderate but unimpaired fortune through sober generations.

Such people are born logical when not born fools. And now Cleland Senior, mortified and irritated by the increasing longing which obsessed him, asked himself frequently which of these he really was.

Every atom of logic in him counselled him to abstain from what every instinct in him was desiring and demanding—a little child to fill the loneliness of his heart and house—something to mitigate the absence of his son, whose absences must, in the natural course of events, become more frequent and of longer duration with the years of college imminent, and the demands of new interests, new friends increasing year by year.

He told himself that to take another child into his home would be unfair to Jim; to take her into his heart was disloyal; that the dear past belonged to his wife alone, the present and the future to his only son.

And all the while the man was starving for what he wanted.

Well, the arrangements took some time to complete; but they were fairly complete when finished. She kept her own name; she was to have six thousand dollars a year for life after she became twenty-one. He charged himself with her mental, moral, spiritual, physical, and general education.

It came about in the following manner:

First of all, he went to see a gentleman whom he had known for many years, but whose status with himself had always remained a trifle indefinite in his mind—somewhere betwixt indifferent friendship and informal acquaintanceship.

The gentleman's name was Chiltern Grismer; his business, charity and religion. He did not dispense either of these, however; he made a living for himself out of both. Cleland had learned at the United Charities that Grismer was an important personage in the *Manhattan Charities Concern*, a separate sectarian affair with a big office building, and a book bindery in Brooklyn for the immense tonnage of sectarian books and pamphlets published and sold by the "Concern," as it called itself. The profits were said to be enormous.

Grismer, tall, bony, sandy and with a pair of unusually light yellowish eyes behind eye-glasses, appeared the classical philanthropist of the stage. With his white, bushy side-whiskers, his frock coat, and his little ready-made black bow-tie, slightly

askew under a high choker, he certainly dressed the part. In fact, any dramatic producer would have welcomed him in the rôle, for he had no "business" to learn; it was perfectly natural for him to join his finger tips together while conversing; and his voice and manner left nothing whatever to criticize.

"Ah! My friend of many years!" he exclaimed as Cleland was ushered into his office in the building of the Manhattan Charities Concern. "And how, I pray, can I be of service to my old friend, John Cleland? M-m-m'yes—my friend of many years!"

Cleland told his story very simply, adding:

"I understand that your Concern is handling Case 119, Grismer—acting, I believe, for a child-placing agency."

"*Which* case?" demanded Grismer, almost sharply.

"Case 119. The case of Stephanie Quest," repeated Cleland.

Grismer looked at him with odd intentness for a moment, then his eyes shifted, as though something were disturbing his suave mental tranquillity:

"M-m-m'yes. Oh, yes. I believe we have this case to handle among many others. M-m-m! Quite so; quite so. Case 119? Quite so."

"May I have the child?" asked Cleland bluntly.

"Bless me! Do you really wish to take such chances, Cleland?"

"Why not? Others take them, don't they?"

"M-m-m'yes. Oh, yes. Certainly. But it is usually people of the—ah—middle and lower classes who adopt children. M-m-m'yes; the middle and lower classes. And, naturally, *they* would not be very much disappointed in a foundling or waif who failed to—ah—develop the finer, subtler, more delicate Christian qualities that a gentleman in your position might reasonably expect—m-m-m'yes!—might, as it were, demand in an adopted child."

"I'll take those chances in the case in question," said Cleland, quietly.

"M-m-m'yes, the case in question. Case 119. Quite so.... I am wondering——" he passed a large, dry hand over his chin and mouth, reflectively, while his light-coloured eyes remained alertly on duty. "I have been wondering whether you have looked about before deciding on this particular child. There are a great many other deserving cases, m-m-m'yes—a great many deserving cases——"

"I want this particular child, Grismer."

"Quite so. M-m-m'yes." He looked up almost furtively. "You—ah—have some previous knowledge, perhaps, of this little girl's antecedents?"

Mr. Grismer's voice grew soft and persuasive; his finger tips were gently joined. Cleland, looking up at him, caught a glimmer resembling suspicion in those curiously light-coloured eyes.

"Yes, I have learned certain things about her," he said shortly. "I know enough! I want that child for mine and I'm going to have her."

"May I ask—ah—just what facts you have learned about this unfortunate infant?"

Cleland, bored to the verge of irritation, told him what he had learned.

There was a silence during which Grismer came to the conclusion that he had better tell Cleland another fact which necessary legal investigation of the child's antecedents might more bluntly reveal. Yes, certainly Grismer felt that he ought to place himself on record at once and explain this embarrassing fact in his own way before others cruelly misinterpreted it to Cleland. For John Cleland's position in New York among men of wealth, of affairs, of influence, and of culture made this sudden and unfortunate whim of his for Stephanie Quest a matter of awkward importance to Chiltern Grismer, who had not cared to figure in the case at all.

Grismer's large, dry hand continued to massage his jaw. Now and then the bony fingers wandered caressingly toward the white side-whiskers, but always returned to screen the thin lips with a gentle, incessant massage.

"Cleland," he began in a solemn voice, "have you ever heard that this child is—ah—is a very distant connection of my family?—m-m-m'yes—my immediate family. Have you ever heard any ill-natured gossip of this nature?"

Cleland, too astonished to reply, merely gazed at him. And Grismer wrongly concluded that he had heard about it, somewhere or other.

"M-m-m'yes—a connection—very distant, of course. In the event that you have heard of this unfortunate affair from sources perhaps unfriendly to myself and family—m-m-m'yes, unfriendly—possibly it were judicious to explain the matter to you—in justice to myself."

"I never heard of it," said Cleland, "—never dreamed of such a connection."

But to Grismer all men were liars.

"Oh, I did not know. I thought you might have heard malicious rumours. But it is just as well that you should be correctly informed.... Do you recollect ever reading anything concerning my—ah—late sister?"

"Do you mean something that happened many, many years ago?"

"That is what I refer to. Did you read of it in the newspapers?"

"Yes," said Cleland. "I read that she ran away with a married man."

"Doubtless," continued Grismer with a sigh, "you recollect the dreadful disgrace she brought upon my family? The cruel scandal exploited by a pitiless and malicious press?"

Cleland said nothing.

"Let me tell you the actual facts," continued Grismer gently. "The unfortunate woman became infatuated with a common Pullman conductor—an Irishman named Conway—a very ordinary man who already was married.

"His religion forbade divorce; my wretched sister ran away with him. We have always striven to bear the disgrace with resignation—m-m-m'yes, with patience and resignation. That is the story."

Cleland, visibly embarrassed, sat twisting the handle of his walking-stick, looking persistently away from Grismer. The latter sighed heavily.

"And so," he murmured, "our door was forever closed to her and hers. She became as one ignobly dead to us—as a soul damned for all eternity."

"Oh, come, Grismer——"

"Damned—hopelessly, and for all eternity," repeated Grismer with a slight snap of his jaw; "—she and her children, and her children's children——"

"What!"

"—The sins of the parents that are borne through generations!"

"Nonsense! That is Old Testament bosh——"

"Pardon!" said Grismer, with a pained forbearance. "It is the creed of those who worship and believe the truth as taught in the church of which I am a member."

"Oh, I beg your pardon."

"Granted," said Grismer sadly.

He sat caressing his jaw in silence for a while, then:

"Her name was Jessie Grismer. She—ah—assumed the name of Conway.... God did not bless the unholy union. There was a daughter, Laura. A certain Harry Quest, the profligate, wasted son of that good man, the Reverend Anthony Quest, married this girl, Laura Conway.... God, mindful of His wrath, still punished the seed of my sinful sister, even until the second generation.... Stephanie Quest is their daughter."

"Good heavens, Grismer! I can't understand that you, knowing this, have not done something——"

"Why? Am I to presume to interfere with God's purpose? Am I to question the righteousness of His wrath?"

"But—she is the little grandchild of your own sister!——"

"A sister utterly cut off from among us! A sister dead to us—a soul eternally lost and to be eternally forgotten."

"Is that your—*creed*—Grismer?"

"It is."

"Oh. I thought that sort of—I mean, I thought such creeds were out of date—old-fashioned——"

"God," said Chiltern Grismer patiently, "is old-fashioned, I believe—m-m-m'yes—very old fashioned, Cleland. But His purposes are terrible, and His wrath is a living thing to those who have the fear of God within their hearts."

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry, but I really can't be afraid of God. If I were, I'd doubt Him, Grismer.... Come; may I have the little girl?"

"Do you desire her to abide under your roof after what you have learned?"

"Why, Grismer, I'd travel all the way to hell to get her now, if any of your creed had managed to send her there. Come; I've seen the child. It may be a risk, as you say. In fact, it can't help being a risk, Grismer. But—I want her. May I have her?"

"M-m-m——" he touched a bell and a clerk appeared. Then he turned to Cleland. "Would you be good enough to see our Mr. Bunce? I thank you. Good afternoon! I am

happy to have conversed again with my old friend, John Cleland,—m-m-m'yes, my friend of many years."

An hour later John Cleland left "our" Mr. Bunce, armed with proper authority to begin necessary legal proceedings.

Talking it over with Brinton, his attorney, that evening, he related the amazing conversation between himself and Chiltern Grismer.

Brinton laughed:

"It isn't religious bigotry; it's just stinginess. Grismer is the meanest man on Manhattan Island. Didn't you know it?"

"No. I don't know him well—though I've been acquainted with him for a long while. But I don't see how he can be stingy."

"Why?"

"Well, he's interested in charity——"

"He's paid a thumping big salary! He makes money out of charity. Why shouldn't he be interested?"

"But he publishes religious books——"

"Of course. They sell. It's a great graft, Cleland. Don't publish novels if you want to make money; print Bibles!"

"Is that a fact?"

"You bet! There are more parasites in pulpit, publishing house and charity concerns, who live exclusively by exploiting God, than there were unpleasant afflictions upon the epidermis of our late friend, Job. And Chiltern Grismer is one of them—the old skinflint!—hogging his only sister's share of the Grismer money and scared stiff for fear some descendant might reopen the claim and fight the verdict which beggared his own sister!"

"By Gad!" exclaimed Cleland, very red; "I've a mind to look into it and start proceedings again if there is any ground——"

"You can't."

"Why?"

"Not if you adopt this child."

"Not in her behalf?"

"Your motives would be uncharitably suspected, Cleland. You can give her enough. Besides, you don't want to stir up anything—rattle any skeletons—for this little girl's sake."

"No, of course not. You're quite right, Brinton. No money could compensate her. And, as you say, I am able to provide for her amply."

"Besides," said Brinton, "there's the paternal aunt, Miss Rosalinda Quest. She's as rich as mud. It may be that she'll do something for the child."

"I don't want her to," exclaimed Cleland angrily. "If she'll make no objection to my taking the girl, she can keep her money and leave it to the niggers of Senegambia when she dies, for all I care! Fix it for me, Brinton."

"You'd better go down to Bayport and interview her yourself," said the lawyer. "And, by the way, I hear she's a queer one—something of a bird, in fact."

"Bird?"

"Well, a vixen. They say so. All the same, she's doing a lot of real good with her money."

"How do you mean?"

"She's established a sort of home for the offspring of vicious and degenerate parents. It's really quite a wonderful combination of clinic and training school where suspected or plainly defective children are brought to be taught and to remain under observation—really a finely conceived charity, I understand. Why not call on her?"

"Very well," said Cleland, reluctantly, not caring very much about encountering "vixens" and "birds" of the female persuasion.

Except for this paternal aunt and the Grismers, there turned out to be no living human being related to the child Stephanie.

Once assured of this, John Cleland undertook the journey to Bayport, running down in his car one morning, and determined that a combination of mild dignity and gallant urbanity should conquer any untoward symptoms which this "bird" might develop.

When he arrived at the entrance to the place, a nurse on duty gave him proper directions how to find Miss Quest, who was out about the grounds somewhere.

He found her at last, in nurse's garb, marching up and down the gravel paths of the "Common Sense Home for Defectives," as the institution was called.

She was pruning privet hedges. She had a grim face, a belligerent eye, and she stood clicking her pruning shears aggressively as he approached, hat in hand.

"Miss Quest, I presume?" he inquired.

"I'm called Sister Rose," she answered shortly.

"By any other name——" began Cleland, gallantly, but checked himself, silenced by the hostility in her snapping black eyes.

"What do you wish?" she demanded impatiently.

Cleland, very red, swallowed his irritation:

"I came here in regard to your niece——"

"Niece? I haven't any!"

"I beg your pardon; I mean your great-niece——"

"What do you mean? I haven't any that I know of."

"Her name is Stephanie Quest."

"Harry Quest's child? Has he really got a baby? I thought he was lying! He's such a liar—how was I to know that he has a baby?"

"You didn't know it, then?"

"No. He wrote about a child. Of course, I supposed he was lying. That was before I went abroad."

"You've been abroad?"

"I have."

"Long?"

"Several years."

"How long since you've heard from Harry Quest?"

"Several years—a dozen, maybe. I suppose he's living on what I settled on him. If he needed money I'd hear from him soon enough."

"He doesn't need money, now. He doesn't need anything more from anybody. But his little daughter does."

"Is Harry dead?" she asked sharply.

"Very."

"And—that hussy he married——"

"Equally defunct. I believe it was suicide."

"How very nasty!"

"Or," continued Cleland, "it may have been suicide and murder."

"Nastier still!" She turned sharply aside and stood clicking her shears furiously. After a silence: "I'll take the baby," she said in an altered voice.

"She's eleven years old."

"I forgot. I'll take her anyway. She's probably a defective——"

"She is *not*!" retorted Cleland so sharply that Sister Rose turned on him in astonishment.

"Madame," he said, "I want a little child to bring up. I have chosen this one. I possess a comfortable fortune. I offer to bring her up with every advantage, educate her, consider her as my own child, and settle upon her for life a sum adequate for her maintenance. I have the leisure, the inclination, the means to do these things. But you, Madame, are too busy to give this child the intimate personal attention that all children require——"

"How do you know I am?"

"Because your time is already dedicated, in a larger sense, to those unhappy children who need you more than she does."

"Because your life is already consecrated to this noble charity of which you are founder and director. A world of unfortunates is dependent on you. If, therefore, I offer to lighten your burden by relieving you of one responsibility, you could not logically decline or disregard my appeal to your reason——" His voice altered and became lower: "And, Madame, I already love the child, as though she were my own."

After a long silence Sister Rose said:

"It isn't anything you've advanced that influences me. It's my—failure—with Harry. Do you think it hasn't cut me to the—the soul?" she demanded fiercely, flinging the handful of clipped twigs onto the gravel. "Do you think I am heartless because I said his end was a nasty one! It was! Let God judge me. I did my best."

Cleland remained silent.

"As a matter of fact, I don't care what you think," she added. "What concerns me is that, possibly—probably, this child would be better off with you.... You're *the* John Cleland, I presume."

He seemed embarrassed.

"You collect prints and things?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Then you are *the* John Cleland. Why not say so?"

He bowed.

"Very well, then! What you've said has in it a certain amount of common sense. I have, in a way, dedicated my life to all unfortunate children; I might not be able to do justice to Harry's child—give her the intimate personal care necessary—without impairing this work which I have undertaken, and to which I am devoting my fortune."

There was another silence, during which Sister Rose snapped her shears viciously and incessantly. Finally, she looked up at Cleland:

"Does the child care for you?"

"I—think so."

"Very well. But I sha'n't permit you to adopt her."

"Why not?"

"I may want her myself when I'm too old and worn out to work here. I wish her to keep her name."

"Madame——"

"I insist. What did you say her name is? Stephanie? Then her name is to remain Stephanie Quest."

"If you insist——"

"I do! And that's flat! And you need not settle an income on her——"

"I shall do so," he interrupted firmly. "I have ample means to provide for the future of anybody dependent on me, Madame."

"Do you presume to dictate to me what I shall do concerning my own will?" she demanded; and her belligerent eyes fairly snapped at him.

"Do what you like, Madame, but it isn't necessary to——"

"Don't instruct *me*, Mr. Cleland!"

"Very well, Madame——"

"I shall do as I always have done, and that is exactly as I please," she said, glancing at him. "And if I choose to provide for the child in my will, I shall do so without requesting your opinion. Pray understand me, Mr. Cleland. If I let you have her it is only because I am self-distrustful. I failed with Harry Quest. I have not sufficient confidence in myself to risk failure with his daughter."

"Let the matter stand this way until I can consult my attorney and investigate the entire affair. Take her into your home. But remember that she is to bear her own name; that the legal guardianship shall be shared by you and me; that I am to see her

when I choose, take her when I choose.... Probably I shall not choose to do so. All the same, I retain my liberty of action."

Cleland said in a low voice:

"It would be—heartless—if——"

"I'm not heartless," she rejoined tartly. "Therefore, you need not worry, Mr. Cleland. If you love her and she loves you—I tell you you need not worry. All I desire is to retain my liberty of action. And I intend to do it. And that settles it!"

Cleland Senior went home in his automobile.

In a few days the last legal objection was removed. There were no other relatives, no further impediments; merely passionate tears from the child at parting with Schmidt; copious, fat tears from the carpenter's wife; no emotion from the children; none from the canary bird.

CHAPTER IV

In February the child departed from the Schmidts' in charge of an elderly, indigent gentlewoman, recommended to Mr. Cleland at an exorbitant salary. Mrs. Westlake was her name; she inhabited, with a mild and useless husband, the ancient family mansion in Pelham. And here the preliminary grooming of Stephanie Quest began amid a riot of plain living, lofty thinking, excision of double negatives acquired at hazard, and a hospital régime of physical scrubbing.

During February and March the pitiless process continued, punctuated by blessed daily visits from Cleland Senior, laden with offerings, edible and otherwise. And before April, he had won the heart of Stephanie Quest.

The first night that she slept under Cleland's roof, he was so excited that he sat up in the library all night, listening for fear she should awake, become frightened, and cry out.

She slept perfectly. Old Janet had volunteered as nurse and wardrobe mistress, and a new parlour-maid took her place. Janet, aged sixty, had been his dead wife's childhood nurse, his son's nurse in babyhood: then she had been permitted to do in the household whatever she chose; and she chose to dust the drawing-room, potter about the house, and offer herself tea between times.

Janet, entering the library at six in the morning, found Mr. Cleland about ready to retire to bed after an all-night vigil.

"What do you think of what I've done—bringing this child here?" he demanded bluntly, having lacked the courage to ask Janet's opinion before.

Janet could neither read nor write. Her thoughts were slow in crystallizing. For a few moments master and ancient servant stood confronted there in the dusk of early morning.

"Maybe it was God's will, sor," she said at last, in her voice which age had made a little rickety.

"You don't approve?"

"Ah, then Mr. Cleland, sor, was there annything you was wishful for but the dear Missis approved?"

That answer took him entirely by surprise. He had never even thought of looking at the matter from such an angle.

And after Janet went away into the dim depths of the house, he remained standing there, pondering the old Irishwoman's answer.

Suddenly his heart grew full and the tears were salt in his throat—hot and wet in his closed eyes.

"Not that memory and love are lessened, dear," he explained with tremulous, voiceless lips, "—but you have been away so long, and here on earth time moves slowly without you—dearest—dearest——"

"Th' divil's in that young wan," panted Janet outside his chamber door. "She won't be dressed! She's turning summersalts on her bed, God help her!"

"Did you bathe her?" demanded Cleland, hurriedly buttoning his collar and taking one of the scarfs offered by old Meacham.

"I did, sor—and it was like scrubbing an eel. Not that she was naughty, sor—the darlint!—only playful-like and contrayry—all over th' tub, under wather and atop, and pretindin' the soap and brush was fishes and she another chasin' them——"

"Janet!"

"Sorr?"

"Has she had her breakfast?"

"Two, sorr."

"What?"

"Cereal and cream, omelet and toast, three oranges and a pear, and a pint of milk——"

"Good heavens! Do you want to kill the child?"

"Arrah, sorr, she'll never be kilt with feedin'! It's natural to the young, sorr—and she leppin' and skippin' and turnin' over and over like a young kid!—and how I'm to dress her in her clothes God only knows——"

"Janet! Stop your incessant chatter! Go upstairs and tell Miss Stephanie that I want her to dress immediately."

"I will, sorr."

Cleland looked at Meacham and the little faded old man looked back out of wise, tragic eyes which had seen hell—would see it again more than once before he finished with the world.

"What do you think of my little ward, Meacham?"

"It is better not to think, sir; it is better to just believe."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that, sir. If we really think we can't believe. It's pleasanter to hope. The young lady is very pretty, sir."

Cleland Senior always wore a fresh white waistcoat, winter and summer, and a white carnation in his button-hole. He put on and buttoned the one while Meacham adjusted the other.

They had been together many years, these two men. Every two or three months Meacham locked himself in his room and drank himself stupid. Sometimes he remained invisible for a week, sometimes for two weeks. Years ago Cleland had given up hope of helping him. Once, assisted by hirelings, he had taken Meacham by a combination of strategy and force to a famous institute where the periodical dipsomaniac is cured if he chooses to be.

And Meacham emerged, cured to that extent; and immediately proceeded to lock himself in his room and lie there drunk for eighteen days.

Always when he emerged, ashy grey, blinking, neat, and his little, burnt-out eyes tragic with the hell they had looked upon, John Cleland spoke to him as though nothing had happened to interrupt the routine of service. The threads were picked up and knotted where they had been broken; life continued in its accustomed order under the Cleland roof. The master would not abandon the man; the man continued to fight a losing fight until beaten, then locked himself away until the enemy gave his broken body and broken mind a few weeks' respite. Otherwise, the master's faith and trust in this old-time servant was infinite.

"Meacham?"

"Sir."

"I think—Mrs. Cleland—would have approved. Janet thinks so."

"Yes, sir."

"You think so, too?"

"Certainly, sir. Whatever you wished was madame's wish also."

"Master James is so much away these days.... I suppose I am getting old, and—"

He suffered Meacham to invest him with his coat, lifted the lapel and sniffed at the blossom there, squared his broad shoulders, twisted his white moustache.

There was no more attractive figure on Fifth Avenue than Cleland Senior with the bright colour in his cheeks, his vigorous stride and his attire, so suitable to his fresh skin, sturdy years and bearing.

Meacham's eyes were lifted to his master, now. They were of the same age.

"Will you wear a black overcoat or a grey, sir?"

"I don't care. I'm going up to the nursery first. The nursery," he repeated, with a secret thrill at the word, which made him tingle all over in sheerest happiness.

"The car, sir?"

"First," said Cleland, "I must find out what Miss Stephanie wishes—or rather, I must decide what I wish her to do. Telephone the garage, anyway."

There was a silence; Cleland had walked a step or two toward the door. Now, he came back.

"Meacham, I hope I have done what was best. On her father's side there was good blood; on her mother's, physical health.... I know what the risk is. But character is born in the cradle and lowered into the grave. The world merely develops, modifies, or cripples it. But it is the same character.... I've taken the chance—the tremendous responsibility.... It isn't a sudden fancy—an idle caprice;—it isn't for the amusement of making a fine lady out of a Cinderella. I want—a—baby, Meacham. I've been in love with an imaginary child for a long, long time. Now, she's become real. That's all."

"I understand, sir."

"Yes, you do understand. So I ask you to tell me; have I been fair to Mr. James?"

"I think so, sir."

"Will *he* think so? I have not told him of this affair."

"Yes, sir. He will think what madame would have thought of anything that you do." He added under his breath: "As we all think, sir."

There was a pause, broken abruptly by the sudden quavering appeal of Janet at the door once more:

"Mr. Cleland! Th' young lady is all over the house, sor! In her pajaymis and naked feet, running wild-like and ondacent——"

Cleland stepped to the door:

"Where's that child?"

"In the butler's pantry, sor——"

"I'm up here!" came a clear voice from the landing above. Cleland, Janet and Meacham raised their heads.

The child, in her pyjamas, elbows on the landing rail, smiled down upon them through her thick shock of burnished hair. Her lips were applied to an orifice in an orange; her slim fingers slowly squeezed the fruit; her eyes were intently fixed on the three people below.

When Cleland arrived at the third floor landing, he found Stephanie Quest in the nursery, cross-legged on her bed. As he entered, she wriggled off, and, in rose-leaf pyjamas and bare feet, dropped him the curtsy which she had been taught by Mrs. Westlake.

But long since she had taken Cleland's real measure; in her lovely grey eyes a thousand tiny devils danced. He held out his arms and she flung herself into them.

When he seated himself in a big chintz arm-chair, she curled up on his knees, one arm around his neck, the other still clutching her orange.

"Steve, isn't it rather nice to wake up in bed in your own room under your own roof? Or, of course if you prefer Mrs. Westlake's——"

"I don't. I don't——" She kissed him impulsively on his freshly-shaven cheek, tightened her arm around his neck.

"You know I love you," she remarked, applying her lips to the orange and squeezing it vigorously.

"I don't believe you really care much about me, Steve."

Her grey eyes regarded him sideways while she sucked the orange; contented laughter interrupted the process; then, suddenly both arms were around his neck, and her bewitching eyes looked into his, deep, very deeply.

"You know I love you, Dad."

"No, I don't."

"Don't you *really* know it?"

"Do you, really, Steve?"

There was a passionate second of assurance, a slight sigh; the little head warm on his shoulder, vague-eyed, serious, gazing out at the early April sunshine.

"Tell me about your little boy, Dad," she murmured presently.

"You know he isn't very little, Steve. He's fourteen, nearly fifteen."

"I forgot. Goodness!" she said softly and respectfully.

"He seems little to me," continued Cleland, "but he wouldn't like to be thought so. Little girls don't mind being considered youthful, do they?"

"Yes, they *do*! You are teasing me, Dad."

"Am I to understand that I have a ready-made, grown-up family, and no little child to comfort me?"

With a charming little sound in her throat like a young bird, she snuggled closer, pressing her cheek against his.

"*Tell* me," she murmured.

"About what, darling?"

"About your lit—about your boy."

She never tired hearing about this wonderful son, and Cleland never tired of telling about Jim, so they were always in accord on that subject.

Often Cleland tried to read in the gravely youthful eyes uplifted to his the dreamy emotions which his narrative evoked—curiosity, awe, shy delight, frank hunger for a playmate, doubt that this wonder-boy would condescend to notice her, wistfulness, loneliness—the delicate tragedy of solitary souls.

Always her gaze troubled him a little, because he had not yet told his son of what he had done—had not written to him concerning the advent of this little stranger. He had thought that the best and easiest way was to tell Jim when he met him at the railroad station, and, without giving the boy time to think, brood perhaps, perhaps worry, let him see little Stephanie face to face.

It seemed the best way to John Cleland. But, at moments, lying alone, sleepless in the night, he became horribly afraid.

It was about that time that he received a letter from Miss Rosalinda Quest:

DEAR MR. CLELAND:

Will you bring the child out to Bayford, or shall I call to see her when business takes me into town?

I want to see her, so take your choice.

Yours truly,

ROSALINDA QUEST.

This brusque reminder that Stephanie was not entirely his upset Cleland. But there was nothing to do about it except to write the lady a civil invitation to call.

Which she did one morning a week later. She wore battle-grey tweeds and toque, and a Krupp steel equipment of reticule and umbrella; and she looked the fighter from top to toe.

When Cleland came down to the drawing-room with Stephanie. Miss Quest greeted him with perfunctory civility and looked upon Stephanie with unfeigned amazement.

"Is that my niece?" she demanded. And Stephanie, who had been warned of the lady and of the relationship, dropped her curtsy and offered her slender hand with the shy but affable smile instinctive in all children.

But the grey, friendly eyes and the smile did instantly a business for the child which she never could have foreseen; for Miss Quest lost her colour and stood quite dumb and rigid, with the little girl's hand grasped tightly in her grey-gloved fingers.

Finally she found her voice—not the incisive, combative, precise voice which Cleland knew—but a feminine and uncertain parody on it:

"Do you know who I am, Stephanie?"

"Yes, ma'am. You are my Aunt Rosalinda."

Miss Quest took the seat which Cleland offered and sat down, drawing the child to her knee. She looked at her for a long while without speaking.

Later, when Stephanie had been given her congé, in view of lessons awaiting her in the nursery, Miss Quest said to Cleland, as she was going:

"I'm not blind. I can see what you are doing for her—what you have done. The child adores you."

"I love her exactly as though she were my own," he said, flushing.

"That's plain enough, too.... Well, I shall be just. She is yours. I don't suppose there ever will be a corner in her heart for me.... I could love her, too, if I had the time."

"Is not what you renounce in her only another sacrifice to the noble work in which you are engaged?"

"Rubbish! I like my work. But it does do a lot of good. And it's quite true that I can not do it and give my life to Stephanie Quest. And so——" she shrugged her trim shoulders—"I can scarcely expect the child to care a straw for me, even if I come to see her now and then."

Cleland said nothing. Miss Quest marched to the door, held open by Meacham, turned to Cleland:

"Thank God you got her," she said. "I failed with Harry; I don't deserve her and I dare not claim responsibility. But I'll see that she inherits what I possess——"

"Madame! I beg you will not occupy yourself with such matters. I am perfectly able to provide sufficiently——"

"Good Lord! Are you trying to tell me again how to draw my will?" she demanded.

"I am not. I am simply requesting you not to encumber this child with any unnecessary fortune. There is no advantage to her in any unwieldy inheritance; there is, on the contrary, a very real and alarming disadvantage."

"I shall retain my liberty to think as I please, do as I please, and differ from you as often as I please," she retorted hotly.

They glared upon each other for a moment; Meacham's burnt-out gaze travelled dumbly from one to the other.

Suddenly Miss Quest smiled and stretched out her hand to Cleland.

"Thank God," she said again, "that it is you who have the child. Teach her to think kindly of me, if you can. I'll come sometimes to see her—and to disagree with you."

Cleland, bare-headed, took her out to her taxicab. She smiled at him when it departed.

CHAPTER V

There came the time when Easter vacation was to be reckoned with. Cleland wrote to Jim that he had a surprise for him and that, as usual, he would be at the station to meet the school train.

During the intervening days, at moments fear became an anguish. He began to realize what might happen, what might threaten his hitherto perfect understanding with his only son.

He need not have worried.

Driving uptown in the limousine beside his son, their hands still tightly interlocked, he told him very quietly what he had done, and why. The boy, astonished, listened in silence to the end. Then all he said was:

"For heaven's sake, Father!"

There was not the faintest hint of resentment, no emotion at all except a perfectly neutral amazement.

"How old is she?"

"Eleven, Jim."

"Oh. A kid. Does she cry much?"

"They don't cry at eleven," explained his father, laughing in his relief. "You didn't squall when you were eleven."

"No. But this is a girl."

"Don't worry, old chap."

"No. Do you suppose I'll like her?"

"Of course, I hope you will."

"Well, I probably sha'n't notice her very much, being rather busy.... But it's funny.... A kid in the house! ... I hope she won't get fresh."

"Be nice to her, Jim."

"Sure.... It's funny, though."

"It really isn't very funny, Jim. The little thing has been dreadfully unhappy all her life until I—until we stepped in."

"*We?*"

"You and I, Jim. It's our job."

After a silence the boy said:

"What was the matter with her?"

"Starvation, cruelty."

The boy's incredulous eyes were fastened on his father's.

"Cold, hunger, loneliness, neglect. And drunken parents who beat her so mercilessly that once they broke two of her ribs.... Don't talk about it to her, Jim. Let the child forget if she can."

"Yes, sir."

The boy's eyes were still dilated with horror, but his features were set and very still.

"We've got to look out for her, old chap."

"Yes," said the boy, flushing.

Cleland Senior, of course, expected to assist at the first interview, but Stephanie was not to be found.

High and low Janet searched; John Cleland, troubled, began a tour of the house, calling:

"Steve! Where are you?"

Jim, in his room, unstrapping his suitcase, felt rather than heard somebody behind him; and, looking up over his shoulder saw a girl.

She was a trifle pale; dropped him a curtsey:

"I'm Steve," she said breathlessly.

Boy and girl regarded each other in silence for a moment; then Jim offered his hand:

"How do you do?" he said, calmly.

"I—I'm very well. I hope you are, too."

Another pause, during a most intent mutual inspection.

"My tennis bat," explained Jim, with polite condescension, "needs to be re-strung. That's why I brought it down from school.... Do you play tennis?"

"No."

Cleland Senior, on the floor below, heard the young voices mingling above him, listened, then quietly withdrew to the library to await events.

Janet looked in later.

"Do they like each other?" he asked in a low, anxious voice.

"Mr. Cleland, sor, Miss Steve is on the floor listenin' to that blessed boy read thim pieces he has wrote in the school paper! Like two lambs they do be together, sor, and the fine little gentleman and little lady they are, God be blessed this April day!"

After a while he went upstairs, cautiously, the soft carpet muffling his tread.

Jim, seated on the side of his bed, was being worshipped, permitting it, accepting it. Stephanie, cross-legged on the floor, adored him with awed, uplifted gaze, her clasped hands lying in her lap.

"To be a writer," Jim condescended to explain, "a man has got to work like the dickens, study everything you ever heard of, go out and have adventures, notice everything that people say and do, how they act and walk and talk. It's a very interesting profession, Steve.... What are *you* going to be?"

"I don't know," she whispered, "—nothing, I suppose."

"Don't you want to be something? Don't you want to be celebrated?"

She thought, hesitatingly, that it would be pleasant to be celebrated.

"Then you'd better think up something to do to make the world notice you."

"I shouldn't know what to do."

"Father says that the thing you'd rather do to amuse yourself is the proper profession to take up. What do you like to do?"

"Ought I to try to write, as you do?"

"You mustn't ask me. Just think what you'd rather do than anything else."

The girl thought hard, her eyes fixed on him, her brows slightly knitted with the effort at concentration.

"I—I'd honestly really rather just be with dad—and *you*——"

The boy laughed:

"I don't mean that!"

"No, I know. But I can't think of anything.... Perhaps I could learn to act in a play—or do beautiful dances, or draw pictures——?" her voice continuing in the rising inflection of inquiry.

"Do you like to draw and dance and act in private theatricals?"

"Oh, I never acted in a play or danced folk-dances, except in school. And I never had things of my own to make pictures with—except once I had a piece of blue chalk and I made pictures on the wall in the hall."

"What hall?"

"It was a very dirty hall. I was punished for making pictures on the wall."

"Oh," said the boy, soberly.

After a moment the boy jumped up:

"I'm hungry. I believe luncheon is nearly ready. Come on, Steve!"

The child could scarcely speak from pride and happiness when the boy condescended to take her hand and lead her out of that enchanted place into the magic deeps below.

At nine-thirty that evening Stephanie made the curtsy which had been taught her, to Cleland Senior, and was about to repeat the process to Cleland Junior, when the latter laughed and held out his hand.

"Good night, Steve," he said reassuringly. "You've got to be a regular girl with me."

She took his hand, held it, drew closer. To his consternation, he realized that she was expecting to kiss him, and he hastily wrung her hand and sat down.

The child's face flushed: she turned to Cleland Senior for the kiss to which he had accustomed her. Her lips were quivering, and the older man understood.

"Good night, darling," he said, drawing her close into his arms, and whispered in her ear gaily: "You've scared him, Steve. He's only a boy, you know."

Her head, buried against his shoulder, concealed the starting tears.

"You've scared him," repeated Cleland Senior. "All boys are shy about girls."

Suddenly it struck her as funny; she smiled; the tears dried in her eyes. She twisted around, and, placing her lips against the elder man's ear, she whispered:

"I'm afraid of him, but I do like him!"

"He likes *you*, but he's a little afraid of you yet."

That appealed to her once more as exquisitely funny. She giggled, snuggled closer, observed by Jim with embarrassment and boredom. But he was too polite to betray it.

Stephanie, with one arm around Cleland's neck, squeezed herself tightly against him and recounted in a breathless whisper her impressions of his only son:

"I do like him so much, Dad! He talked to me upstairs about his school and all the boys there. He was very kind to me. Do you think I'm too little for him to like me? I'm growing rather fast, you know. I'd do anything for him, anything. I wish you'd tell him that. Will you?"

"Yes, I will, dear. Now, run upstairs to Janet."

"Shall I say good night to Jim again?"

"If you like. But don't kiss him, or you'll scare him."

They both had a confidential and silent fit of laughter over this; then the child slid from his knees, dropped a hasty, confused curtsy in Jim's direction, turned and scampered upstairs. And a gale of laughter came floating out of the nursery, silenced as Janet shut the door.

The subdued glow of a lamp fell over father and son; undulating strata of smoke drifted between them from the elder man's cigar.

"Well, Jim?"

"Yes, Father."

"Do you like her?"

"She's a—funny girl.... Yes, she's a rather nice little kid."

"We'll stand by her, won't we, Jim?"

"Yes, sir."

"Make up to her the lost days—the cruellest injustice that can be inflicted—the loss of a happy childhood."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, old chap. Now, tell me all about yourself and what has happened since you wrote."

"I had a fight."

"With whom, Jim?"

"With Oswald Grismer, of the first form."

"What did he do to you?" inquired his father.

"He said something—about a girl."

"What girl?"

"I don't know her."

"Go on."

"Nothing.... Except I told him what I thought of him."

"For what? For speaking disrespectfully about a girl you never met?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh. Go on."

"Nothing more, sir.... Except that we mixed it."

"I see. Did you—hold your own?"

"They said—I think I did, sir."

"Grismer is—your age? Younger? Older?"

"Yes, sir, older."

"How do you and he weigh in?"

"He's—I believe—somewhat heavier."

"First form boy. Naturally. Well, did you shake hands?"

"No, sir."

"That's bad, Jim."

"I know it. I—somehow—couldn't."

"Do it next term. No use to fight unless to settle things."

The boy remained silent, and his father did not press the matter.

"What shall we do to-morrow, Jim?" inquired Cleland Senior, after a long pause.

"Do you mean just you and me, Father?"

"Oh, yes. Steve will be busy with her lessons. And, in the evening, nine-thirty is her bedtime."

The boy said, with a sigh of unconscious relief:

"I need a lot of things. We'll go to the shops first. Then we'll lunch together, then we can take in a movie, then we'll dine all by ourselves, and then go to the theatre. What do you say, Father?"

"Fine!" said his father, with the happy thrill which comes to fathers whose growing sons still prefer their company to the company of anybody else.

CHAPTER VI

To Cleland Senior it seemed as though Jim's Easter vacation ended before it had fairly begun; so swiftly sped the blessed days together.

Already the morning of his son's departure for school had dawned, and he realized it with the same mental sinking, the same secret dismay and painful incredulity which he always experienced when the dreaded moment for parting actually arrived.

As usual, he prepared to accompany his son to the railway station. It happened not to occur to him that Stephanie might desire to go.

At breakfast, his son sat opposite as usual, Stephanie on his right, very quiet, and keeping her grey eyes on her plate so persistently that the father finally noticed her subdued demeanour, and kept an eye on her until in her momentarily lifted face he detected the sensitive, forced smile of a child close to tears.

All the resolute composure she could summon did not conceal from him the tragedy of a child who is about to lose its hero and who feels itself left out—excluded, as it were, from the last sad rites.

He was touched, conscience stricken, and yet almost inclined to smile. He said casually, as they rose from the table:

"Steve, dear, tell Janet to make you ready at once, if you are going to see Jim off."

"Am—I—going!" faltered the child, flushing and tremulous with surprise and happiness.

"Why, of course. Run quickly to Janet, now." And, to his son, when the eager little flying feet had sped out of sight and hearing: "Steve felt left out, Jim. Do you understand, dear?"

"Y-yes, Father."

"Also, she is inclined to take your departure very seriously. You do understand, don't you, my dear son?"

The boy said that he did, vaguely disappointed that he was not to have the last moments alone with his father.

So they all went down town together in the car, and there were other boys there with parents; and some recognitions among the other people; desultory, perfunctory conversations, cohesion among the school boys welcoming one another with ardour and strenuous cordiality after only ten days' separation.

Chiltern Grismer, father of Oswald, came over and spoke to Cleland Senior:

"Our respective sons, it appears, so far forgot their Christian principles as to indulge in a personal encounter in school," he said in a pained voice. "Hadh't they better shake hands, Cleland?"

"Certainly," replied John Cleland. "If a fight doesn't clean off the slate, there's something very wrong somewhere ... Jim?"

Cleland Junior left the group of gossiping boys; young Grismer, also, at his father's summons, came sauntering nonchalantly over from another group.

"Make it up with young Cleland!" said Chiltem Grismer, tersely. "Mr. Cleland and I are friends of many years. Let there be no dissension between our sons."

"Offer your hand, Jim," added Cleland Senior. "A punch in the nose settles a multitude of sins; doesn't it, Grismer?"

The ceremony was effected reluctantly, and in anything but a cordial manner. Stephanie, looking on, perplexed, caught young Grismer's amber-coloured eyes fixed on her; saw the tall, sandy-haired boy turn to look at her as he moved away to rejoin his particular group; saw the colour rising in his mischievous face when she surprised him peeping at her again over another boy's shoulder.

Several times, before the train left, the little girl became conscious that this overgrown, sandy-haired boy was watching her, sometimes with frankly flattering admiration, sometimes furtively, as though in sly curiosity.

"Who is that kid?" she distinctly heard him say to another boy. She calmly turned her back.

And was presently aware of the elder Grismer's expressionless gaze concentrated upon herself.

"Is this the little girl?" he said to Cleland Senior in his hard, dry voice.

"That is my little daughter, Stephanie," replied Cleland coldly, discouraging any possible advances on Grismer's part. For there would never be any reason for bringing Stephanie in contact with the Grismers; and there might be reasons for keeping her ignorant of their existence. Which ought to be a simple matter, because he never saw Grismer, except when he chanced to encounter him quite casually here and there in town.

"She's older than I supposed," remarked Grismer, staring steadily at her, where she stood beside Jim, shyly conversing with a group of his particular cronies. Boy-like, they all were bragging noisily for her exclusive benefit, talking school-talk, and swaggering and showing off quite harmlessly as is the nature of the animal at that age.

"I don't observe any family resemblance," mused Grismer, pursing his slit-like lips.

"No?" inquired Cleland drily.

"No, none whatever. Of course, the connection is remote—m-m-m'yes, quite remote. I trust," he added magnanimously, "that you will be able to render her life comfortable and pleasant; and that the stipend you purpose to bestow upon her may, if wisely administered, keep her from want."

Cleland, who was getting madder every moment, turned very red now.

"I think," he said, managing to control his temper, "that it will scarcely be a question of want with Stephanie Quest. What troubles me a little is that she's more than likely to be an heiress."

"What!"

"It looks that way."

"Do you—do you mean, Cleland, that—that any legal steps to re-open——"

"Good Lord, no!" exclaimed Grismer, contemptuously. "She wouldn't touch a penny of Grismer money—not a penny! I wouldn't lift a finger to stir up that mess again, even if it meant a million for her!"

Grismer breathed more easily, though Cleland's frank and unconcealed scorn left a slight red on his parchment-like skin.

"Our conception of moral and spiritual responsibility differs, I fear," he said, "—as widely as our creeds differ. I regret that my friend of many years should appear to be a trifle biassed—m-m-m'yes, a trifle biassed in his opinion——"

"It's none of my affair, Grismer. We're different, that's all. You had, perhaps, a legal right to your unhappy sister's share of the Grismer inheritance. You exercised it; I should not have done so. It's a matter of conscience—to put it pleasantly."

"It is a matter of creed," said Grismer grimly. "It was God's will."

Cleland shrugged.

"Let it go at that. Anyway, you needn't worry over any possible action that might be brought against you or your heirs. There won't be any. What I meant was that the child's aunt, Miss Rosalinda Quest, seems determined to leave little Stephanie a great deal more money than is good for anybody. It isn't necessary. I don't believe in fortunes. I'm wary of them, afraid of them. They change people—often change their very natures. I've seen it too many times—observed the undesirable change in people who were quite all right before they came into fortunes. No; I am able to provide for her amply; I have done so. That ought to be enough."

Grismer's dry, thin lips remained parted; he scarcely breathed; and his remarkable eyes continued to bore into Cleland with an intensity almost savage.

Finally he said, in a voice so dry that it seemed to crackle:

"This is—amazing. I understood that the family had cast out and utterly disowned the family of Harry Quest—m-m-m'yes, turned him out completely—him and his. So you will pardon my surprise, Cleland.... Is—ah—the Quest fortune—as it were—considerable?"

"Several millions, I believe," replied Cleland carelessly, moving away to rejoin his son and Stephanie, where they stood amid the noisy, laughing knot of school-boys.

Grismer looked after him, and his face, which had become drawn, grew almost ghastly. So this was it! Cleland had fooled him. Cleland, with previous knowledge of what this aunt was going to do for the child, had cunningly selected her for adoption—doubtless designed her, ultimately, for his son. Cleland had known this; had kept the knowledge from him. And that was the reason for all this philanthropy. Presently he summoned his son, Oswald, with a fierce gesture of his hooked forefinger.

The boy detached himself leisurely from his group of school-fellows and strolled up to his father.

"Don't quarrel with young Cleland again. Do you hear?" he said harshly.

"Well, I——"

"Do you *hear*?—you little fool!"

"Yes, sir, but——"

"Be silent and obey! Do as I order you. Seek his friendship. And, if opportunity offers, become friends with that little girl. If you don't do as I say, I'll cut your allowance. Understand me, I want you to be good friends with that little girl!"

Oswald cast a mischievous but receptive glance toward Stephanie.

"I'll sure be friends with her, if I have a show," he said. "She's easily the prettiest kid I ever saw. But Jim doesn't seem very anxious to introduce me. Maybe next term——" He shrugged, but regarded Stephanie with wistful golden eyes.

After the gates were opened, and when at last the school boys had departed and the train was gone, Stephanie remained tragically preoccupied with her personal loss in the departure of Cleland Junior. For he was the first boy she had ever known; and she worshipped him with all the long-pent ardour of a lonely heart.

Memory of the sandy youth with golden eyes continued in abeyance, although he had impressed her. It had, in fact, been a new experience for her to be noticed by an older boy; and, although she considered young Grismer homely and a trifle insolent, there remained in her embryonic feminine consciousness the grateful aroma of incense swung before her—incense not acceptable, but still unmistakably incense—the subtle flattery of man.

As for young Grismer, reconciliation between him and Jim having been as pleasantly effected as the forcible feeding of a jailed lady on a hunger strike, he sauntered up to Cleland Junior in the car reserved for Saint James School, and said amiably:

"Who was the little peach you kissed good-bye, Jim?"

The boy's clear brown eyes narrowed just a trifle.

"She's—my—sister," he drawled. "What about it?"

"She's so pretty—for a kid—that's all."

Jim, eyeing him menacingly, replied in the horrid vernacular:

"That's no sty on *your* eye, is it?"

"F'r heaven's sake!" protested Grismer. "Are you still carrying that old chip on your shoulder? I thought it was all squared."

Jim considered him for a few moments.

"All right," he said; "it's squared, Oswald.... Only, somehow I can't get over feeling that there are some more fights ahead of us.... Have a caramel?"

Chiltern Grismer joined Cleland Senior on the way to the street, and they strolled together toward the station entrance. Stephanie walked in silence beside Cleland, holding rather tightly to his arm, not even noticing Grismer, and quite overwhelmed by her own bereavement.

Grismer murmured in his dry, guarded voice:

"She's pretty enough and nicely enough behaved to be your own daughter."

Cleland nodded; a deeper flush of annoyance spread over his handsome, sanguine face. He resented it when people did not take Stephanie for his own flesh and blood; and it even annoyed him that Grismer should mention a matter upon which he had become oddly sensitive.

"I hope you won't ever be sorry, Cleland," remarked the other in his dry, metallic voice. "Yes, indeed, I hope you won't regret your philanthropic venture."

"I am very happy in my little daughter," replied Cleland quietly.

"She's turning out quite satisfactory?"

"Of course!" snapped the other.

"M-m-m!" mused Grismer between thin, dry lips. "It's rather too early to be sure, Cleland. You never can tell what traits are going to reveal themselves in the young. There's no knowing what may crop out in them. No—no telling; no telling. Of course, sometimes they turn out well. M-m-m'yes, quite well. That's our experience in the Charities Association. But, more often, they—don't!—to be perfectly frank with you—they *don't* turn out very well."

Cleland's features had grown alarmingly red.

"I'm not apprehensive," he managed to say.

"Oh, no, of course, it's no use worrying. Time will show. M-m-m! Yes. It will all be made manifest in time. M-m-m'yes! Time'll show, Cleland—time'll show. But—I knew my sister," he added sadly, "and I am afraid—very much afraid."

At the entrance for motors they parted. Grismer got into a shabby limousine driven by an unkempt chauffeur.

"Going my way, Cleland?"

"Thanks, I have my car."

"In that case," returned Grismer, "I shall take my leave of you. Good-bye, and God be with you," he said piously. "And good-bye to *you*, my pretty little miss," he added graciously, distorting his parchment features into something resembling a smile. "Tell your papa to bring you to see me sometime when my boy is home from school; and," he added rather vaguely, "we'll have a nice time and play games. *Good-bye!*"

"Who was that man, Daddy?" asked Stephanie, as their own smart little car drew up.

"Oh, nobody—just a man with whom I have a—a sort of acquaintance," replied Cleland.

"Was that his boy who kept looking at me all the while in the station, Daddy?"

"I didn't notice. Come, dear, jump in."

So he took Stephanie back to the house where instruction in the three R's awaited her, with various extras and embellishments suitable for the education of the daughter of John William Cleland.

The child crept up close to him in the car, holding tightly to his arm with both of hers.

"I'm lonely for Jim," she whispered. "I——" but speech left her suddenly in the lurch.

"You're going to make me proud of you, darling; aren't you?" he murmured, looking down at her.

The child merely nodded. Grief for the going of her first boy had now left her utterly dumb.

CHAPTER VII

There is a serio-comic, yet charming, sort of tragedy—fortunately only temporary—in the attachment of a little girl for an older boy. It often bores him so; and she is so daintily in earnest.

The one adores, tags after, and often annoys; the other, if chivalrous, submits.

It began this way between Stephanie Quest and Jim Cleland. It continued. She realized with awe the discrepancy in their ages; he was amiable enough to pretend to waive the discrepancy. And his condescension almost killed her.

The poor child grew older as fast as she possibly could; resolute, determined to overtake him somewhere, if that could be done. For in spite of arithmetic she seemed to know that it was possible. Moreover, it was wholly characteristic of her to attack with pathetic confidence the impossible—to lead herself as a forlorn hope and with cheerful and reckless resolution into the most hopeless impasse.

Cleland Senior began to notice this trait in her—began to wonder whether it was an admirable trait or a light-headed one.

Once, an imbecile canary, purchased by him for her, and passionately cherished, got out of its open cage, out of the open nursery window, and perched on a cornice over one of the windows. And out of the window climbed Stephanie, never hesitating, disregarding consequences, clinging like a desperate kitten to sill and blind, negotiating precarious ledges with steady feet; and the flag-stones of the area four stories below her, and spikes on the iron railing.

A neighbour opposite fainted; another shouted incoherently. It became a hair-raising situation; she could neither advance nor retreat. The desperate, Irish keening of Janet brought Meacham; Meacham, at the telephone, notified the nearest police station, and a section of the Fire Department. The latter arrived with extension ladders.

It was only when pushed violently bed-ward, as punishment, that the child realized there had been anything to be frightened about. Then she became scared; and was tearfully glad to see Cleland when he came in that evening from a print-hunting expedition.

And once, promenading on Fifth Avenue with Janet, for the sake of her health—such being the régime established—she separated two violently fighting school-boys, slapped the large one, who had done the bullying, soundly, cuffed another, who had been enjoying the unequal combat, fell upon a fourth, and was finally hustled home with her expensive clothing ruined. But in her eyes and cheeks still lingered the brilliant fires of battle, when Janet stripped her for a bath.

And once in the park she sprang like a young tigress upon a group of ragamuffins who had found a wild black mallard duck, nesting in a thicket near the lake, and who were stoning the frightened thing.

All Janet could see was a most dreadful *melée* agitating the bushes, from which presently burst boy after boy, in an agony of flight, rushing headlong and terror-stricken from that dreadful place where a wild-girl raged, determined on their extermination.

Stephanie's development was watched with tender, half-fearful curiosity by Cleland.

As usual, two separate columns were necessary to record the varied traits so far apparent in her. These traits Cleland noted in the book devoted to memoranda concerning the child, writing them as follows:

Inclined to self-indulgence.	Easily moved to impulsive self-sacrifice.
Consequently, a trifle selfish at times.	Ardent in her affections; loyal to friendship; and essentially truthful.
Over-sensitive and likely to exaggerate.	Indignation quickly
Very great talent latent: excited possibly histrionic.	by any form of cruelty or treachery. Action likely to be immediate without regard for personal considerations.
Anger, when finally aroused, likely to lead to extremes.	
Generous with her possessions.	

So far he could discover nothing vicious in her, no unworthy inherited instincts beyond those common to young humans, instincts supposed to be extirpated by education.

She was no greedier than any other healthy child, no more self-centred; all her appetites were normal, all her inclinations natural. She had a good mind, but a very human one, fairly balanced but sensitive to emotion, inclination, and impulse, and sometimes rather tardy in readjusting itself when logic and reason were required to regain equilibrium.

But the child was more easily swayed by gratitude than by any other of the several human instincts known as virtues.

So she grew toward adolescence, closely watched by Cleland, good-naturedly tolerated by Jim, worshipped by Janet, served by Meacham with instinctive devotion—the only quality in him not burnt out in his little journeys through hell.

There were others, too, in the world, who remembered the child. There was her aunt, who came once a month and brought always an expensive present, over the suitability of which she and Cleland differed to the verge of rudeness. But they always parted on excellent terms. And there was Chiltern Grismer, who sat sometimes for hours in his office, thinking about the child and the fortune which threatened her.

Weeks, adhering to one another, became months; months totalled years—several of them, recorded so suddenly that John Cleland could not believe it.

He had arrived at that epoch in the life of man when the years stood still with him: when he neither felt himself changing nor appeared to grow older, though all around him he was constantly aware of others aging. Yet, being always with

Stephanie, he could not notice her rapid development, as he noted the astonishing growth of his son when the boy came home after brief absences at school.

Stephanie, still a child, was becoming something else very rapidly. But still she remained childlike enough to idolize Jim Cleland and to show it, without reserve. And though he really found her excellent company, amusing and diverting, her somewhat persistent and dog-like devotion embarrassed and bored him sometimes. He was at that age.

Young Grismer, in Jim's hearing, commenting upon a similar devotion inflicted on himself by a girl, characterized her as "too damn pleasant"—a brutal yet graphic summary.

And for a while the offensive phrase stuck in Jim's memory, though always chivalrously repudiated as applying to Stephanie. Yet, the poor girl certainly bored him at times, so blind her devotion, so pitiful her desire to please, so eager her heart of a child for the comradeship denied her in the dreadful years of solitude and fear.

For a year or two the affair lay that way between these two; the school-boy's interest in the little girl was the interest of polite responsibility; consideration for misfortune, toleration for her sex, with added allowance for her extreme youth. This was the boy's attitude.

Had not boarding-school and college limited his sojourn at home, it is possible that indifference might have germinated.

But he saw her so infrequently and for such short periods; and even during the summer vacation, growing outside interests, increasing complexity in social relations with fellow students—invitations to house parties, motor trips, camping trips—so interrupted the placid continuity of his vacation in their pleasant summer home in the northern Berkshires, that he never quite realized that Stephanie Quest was really anything more than a sort of permanent guest, billeted indefinitely under his father's roof.

When he was home in New York at Christmas and Easter, his gravely detached attitude of amiable consideration never varied toward her.

The few weeks at a time that he spent at "Runner's Rest," his father's quaint and ancient place on Cold River, permitted him no time to realize the importance and permanency of the place she already occupied as an integral part of the house of Cleland.

A thousand new interests, new thoughts, possessed the boy in the full tide of adolescence. All the world was beginning to unclothe before him like the brilliant, fragrant petals of a magic flower. And in this rainbow transformation of things terrestrial, a boy's mind is always unbalanced by the bewildering and charming confusion of it all—for it is he who is changing, not the world; he is merely learning to see instead of to look, to comprehend instead of to perceive, to realize instead of to take for granted all the wonders and marvels and mysteries to which a young man is heir.

It is drama, comedy, farce, tragedy, this inevitable awakening; it is the alternate elucidation and deepening of mysteries; it is a day of clear, keen reasoning succeeding a day of illogical caprice; an hour aquiver with undreamed-of mental torture followed by an hour of spiritual exaltation; it is the era of magnificent aspiration, of inexplicable fear, of lofty abnegations, of fierce egotisms, of dreams and of convictions, of faiths for which youth dies; and, alas, it is a day of pitiless development which leaves the shadowy memory of faith lingering in the brain, and, on the lips, a smile.

And, amid such emotions, such impulses, such desires, fears, aspirations, hopes, regrets, the average boy puts on that Nessus coat called manhood. And he has, in his temporarily dislocated and unadjusted brain, neither the time nor the patience, nor the interest, nor the logic at his command necessary to see and understand what is happening under his aspiring and heavenward-tilted nose. Only the clouds enrapture him; where every star beckons him he responds in a passion of endeavour.

And so he begins the inevitable climb toward the moon—the path which every man born upon the earth has trodden far or only a little way, but the path all men at least have tried.

In his freshman year at Harvard, he got drunk. The episode was quite inadvertent on his part—one of those accidents incident to the vile, claret-coloured "punches" offered by some young idiot in "honour" of his own birthday.

The Cambridge police sheltered him over night; his fine was over-subscribed; he explored the depths of hell in consequence of the affair, endured the agony of shame, remorse, and self-loathing to the physical and mental limit, and eventually recovered, regarding himself as a reformed criminal with a shattered past.

However, the youthful gloom and melancholy dignity with which this clothed him had a faint and not entirely unpleasant flavour—as one who might say, "I have lived and learned. There is the sad wisdom of worldly things within me." But he cut out alcohol. It being the fashion at that time to shrug away an offered cup, he found little difficulty in avoiding it.

In his Sophomore year, he met the inevitable young person. And, after all that had been told him, all that he had disdainfully pictured to himself, did not recognize her when he met her.

It was one of those episodes which may end any way. And it ended, of course, in one way or another. But it did end.

Thus the limited world he moved in began to wear away the soft-rounded contours of boyhood; he learned a little about men, nothing whatever about women, but was inclined to consider that he understood them sadly and perfectly. He wrote several plays, novels and poems to amuse himself; wrote articles for the college periodicals, when he was not too busy training with the baseball squad or playing tennis, or lounging through those golden and enchanted hours when the smoke of undergraduate pipes spins a magic haze over life, enveloping books and comrades in

that exquisite and softly brilliant web which never tears, never fades in memory while life endures.

He made many friends; he visited many homes; he failed sometimes, but more often he made good in whatever he endeavoured.

His father came on to Cambridge several times—always when his son requested it—and he knew the sympathy of his father in days of triumph, and he understood his father's unshaken belief in his only son when that son, for the moment, faltered.

For he had confided in his father the episodes of the punch and the young person. Never had his father and he been closer together in mind and spirit than after that confession.

In spite of several advances made by Chiltern Grismer, whose son, Oswald, was also at Harvard and a popular man in his class, John Cleland remained politely unreceptive; and there were no social amenities exchanged. Jim Cleland and Oswald Grismer did not visit each other, although friendly enough at Cambridge. Cleland Senior made no particular effort to discourage any such friendly footing, and he was not inclined to judge young Grismer by his father. He merely remained unresponsive.

In such cases, he who makes the advances interprets their non-success according to his own nature. And Grismer concluded that he had been a victim of insidious guile and sharp practice, and that John Cleland had taken Stephanie to his heart only after he had learned that, some day, she would inherit the Quest fortune from her eccentric relative.

Chagrin and sullen irritation against Cleland had possessed him since he first learned of this inheritance; and he nourished both until they grew into a dull, watchful anger. And he waited for something or other that might in some way offer him a chance to repair the vital mistake he had made in his attitude toward the child.

But Cleland gave him no opening whatever; Grismer's social advances were amiably ignored. And it became plainer and plainer to Grismer, as he interpreted the situation, that John Cleland was planning to unite, through his son Jim, the comfortable Cleland income with the Quest millions, and to elbow everybody else out of the way.

"The philanthropic hypocrite," mused Grismer, still smarting from a note expressing civil regrets in reply to an invitation to Stephanie and Jim to join them after church for a motor trip to Lakewood.

"Can't they come?" inquired Oswald.

"Previous engagement," snapped Grismer, tearing up the note. His wife, an invalid, with stringy hair and spots on her face, remarked with resignation that the Clelands were too stylish to care about plain, Christian people.

"Stylish," repeated Grismer, "I've got ten dollars to Cleland's one. I can put on style enough to swamp him if I've a mind to!—m-m-m'yes, if I've a mind to."

"Why don't you?" inquired Oswald, with a malicious side glance at his father's frock coat and ready-made cravat. "Chuck the religious game and wear spats and a topper! It's a better graft, governor."

Chiltern Grismer, only partly attentive to his son's impudence, turned a fierce, preoccupied glance upon him. But his mind was still intrigued with that word "stylish." It began to enrage him.

He repeated it aloud once or twice, sneeringly:

"So you think we may not be sufficiently stylish to suit the Clelands—or that brat they picked out of the sewer? M-m-m'yes, out of an east-side sewer!"

Oswald pricked up his intelligent and rather pointed ears.

"What brat?" he inquired.

Chiltern Grismer had never told his son the story of Stephanie Quest. In the beginning, the boy had been too young, and there seemed to be no particular reason for telling him. Later, when Grismer suddenly developed ambitions in behalf of his son for the Quest fortune, he did not say anything about Stephanie's origin, fearing that it might prejudice his son.

Now, he suddenly concluded to tell him, not from spite entirely, nor to satisfy his increasing resentment against Cleland; but because Oswald would, some day, inherit the Grismer money. And it might be just as well to prime him now, in the event that any of the Clelands should ever start to reopen the case which had deprived Jessie Grismer of her own inheritance so many years ago.

The young fellow listened with languid astonishment as the links of the story, very carefully and morally polished, were displayed by his father for his instruction and edification.

"That is the sort of stylish people they are," concluded Grismer, making an abrupt end. "Let it be a warning to you to keep your eye on the Clelands; for a man that calls himself a philanthropist, and is sharp enough to pick out an heiress from the gutter, will bear watching!—m-m-m'yes, indeed, he certainly will bear watching."

Mrs. Grismer, who was knitting with chilly fingers, sighed.

"You always said it was God's judgment on Jessie and her descendants, Chiltern. But I kind of wish you'd been a little mite more forgiving."

"Who am I?" demanded Grismer, sullenly, "to thwart God's wrath ... m-m-m'yes, the anger of the Lord Almighty! And I never thought of that imbecile aunt.... It was divine will that punished my erring sister and her children, and her children's chil—"

"Rot!" remarked Oswald. "Cleland caught you napping and put one over. That's all that worries you. And now you are properly and piously sore!"

"That is an impious and wickedly outrageous way to talk to your father!" said Grismer, glaring at him. "You have come back from college lacking reverence and respect for everything you have been taught to consider sacred!—m-m-m'yes—everything! You have returned to us utterly demoralized, defiant, rebellious, changed!"

Every worldly abomination seems to attract you: you smoke openly in your mother's presence; your careless and loose conversation betrays your contempt for the simple, homely, and frugal atmosphere in which you have been reared by Christian parents. Doubtless we are not sufficiently stylish for you any longer!" he added sarcastically.

"I'm sorry I was disrespectful, governor——"

"No! You are *not* sorry!" retorted Grismer tartly. "You rejoice secretly in your defiance of your parents! You have been demoralized by the license permitted you by absence from home. You live irresponsibly; you fling away your money on theatres! You yourself admit that you have learned to dance. Nothing that your pastor has taught you, nothing that our church holds sacred seems capable of restraining you from wickedness. That is the truth, Oswald. And your mother and I despair of your future, here and——" he lifted his eyes solemnly—"above."

There was an awkward silence. Finally Oswald said with sullen frankness:

"You see I'm a man, now, and I've got to do my own thinking. Things I used to believe seem tommyrot to me now——"

"Oswald!" sighed his mother.

"I'm sorry to pain you, Mother, but they do! And about everything you object to I find agreeable. I'm not very bad, Mother. But this sort of talk inclines me to raise the devil. What's the harm in going to a show? In dancing? In smoking a cigar? For heaven's sake, let a fellow alone. The line of talk the governor hands me makes a cynic of a man who's got any brains."

There was another silence; then Oswald continued:

"And, while we are trying to be frank with each other this pleasant Sunday morning, what about my career? Let's settle it now!"

"I'm opposed to any such frivolous profession!" snapped Grismer angrily. "That's your answer. And that settles it."

"You mean that you still oppose my studying sculpture?"

"Emphatically."

"Why?" demanded the youth, rather white, but smiling.

"Because it is no business career for a Christian!" retorted his father, furious. "It is a loose, irregular, eccentric profession, beset with pitfalls and temptations. It leads to immorality and unbelief—m-m-m'yes, to hell itself! And that is why I oppose it!"

Oswald shrugged:

"I'm sorry you feel that way but I can't help it, of course."

"Do you mean," inquired his mother, "that you intend to disregard our solemn wishes?"

"I don't know," said the young fellow, "I really don't know, Mother. I can't seem to breathe and expand at home. You've never made things very cheerful for me."

"Oswald! You are utterly heartless!"

"I've been fed up on the governor's kind of religion, on narrow views and gloom; and that's no good for a modern boy. It's a wonder I have any heart at all, and sometimes I think it's dried up——"

"That will do!" shouted Grismer, losing all self-control. "If your home, your parents, and your Creator can not make a Christian of you, there is nothing to hope from you! ... I'll hear no more from you. Go and get ready for church!"

"I sha'n't go," said the young fellow calmly.

When he went back to Cambridge at the end of the week, it was with the desire never to see his home again, and with a vague and burning intention to get even, somehow, by breaking every law of the imbecile religion on which he had been "fed up."

CHAPTER VIII

When Stephanie was fifteen years old, John Cleland took her to Cambridge.

The girl had been attending a celebrated New York school during the last two years. She had developed the bearing and manners which characterized the carefully trained products of that institution, but the régime seemed to have subdued her, and made her retiring and diffident.

She could have formed friendships there had she desired to do so; she formed none; yet any girl there would have been happy and flattered to call Stephanie Quest her friend. But Stephanie cared little for those confidential and intimate relations so popular among school girls of her age.

She made no enemies, however. An engaging reticence and reserve characterized her—the shy and wistful charm of that indeterminate age when a girl is midway in the delicate process of transformation.

If she cared nothing about girls, she lacked self-confidence with boys, though vastly preferring their society; but she got little of it except when Jim's school friends came to the house during holidays. Then she had a heavenly time just watching and listening.

So when John Cleland took her to Cambridge, she had, in the vernacular of the moment, a "wonderful" experience—everything during that period of her career being "wonderful" or "topping."

Jim, as always, was "wonderful;" and the attitude of his friends alternately delighted and awed her, so gaily devoted they instantly became to Jim's "little sister."

But what now secretly thrilled the girl was that Jim, for the first time, seemed to be proud of her, not tolerating her as an immature member of the family, but welcoming her as an equal, on an equal footing. And, with inexpressible delight, she remembered her determination, long ago, to overtake him; and realized that she was doing it very rapidly.

So she went to a football game at the stadium; she took tea in the quarters of these god-like young men; she motored about Cambridge and Boston; she saw all that a girl of fifteen ought to see, heard all that she ought to hear, and went back to New York with John Cleland in the seventh paradise of happiness fulfilled, madly enamoured of Jim and every youthful superman he had introduced to her.

Every year while Jim was at college there was a repetition of this programme, and she and John Cleland departed regularly for Cambridge amid excitement indescribable.

And when, in due time, Jim prepared to emerge from that great university, swaddled in sheepskin, and reeking with Cambridge culture, Stephanie went again to Cambridge with her adopted father—a girl, then, of seventeen, still growing, still in the wondering maze of her own adolescence, exquisitely involved in its magic,

conscious already of its spell, of its witchcraft, which lore she was shyly venturing to investigate.

She had a "wonderful" week in Cambridge—more and more excited by the discovery that young men found her as agreeable as she found them, and that they sought her now on perfectly even terms of years and experience; regarded her as of them, not merely with them. And this enchanted her.

Two of her school friends, the Hildreth girls, were there with their mother, and the latter very gladly extended her wing to cover Stephanie for the dance, John Cleland not feeling very well and remaining in Boston.

And it chanced that Stephanie met there Oswald Grismer; and knew him instantly when he was presented to her. Even after all those years, the girl clearly recollected seeing him in the railroad station, and remembered the odd emotions of curiosity and disapproval she experienced when he stared at her so persistently—disapproval slightly mitigated by consciousness of the boyish flattery his manner toward her implied.

He said, in his easy, half-mischievous way:

"You don't remember me, of course, Miss Quest, but when you were a very little girl I once saw you at the Grand Central Station in New York."

Stephanie, as yet too inexperienced a diplomat to forget such things, replied frankly that she remembered him perfectly. When it was too late, she blushed at her admission.

"That's unusually nice of you," he said. "Maybe it was my bad manners that impressed you, Miss Quest. I remember that I had never seen such a pretty little girl in my life, and I'm very sure I stared at you, and that you were properly annoyed."

He was laughing easily, as he spoke, and she laughed, too, still a trifle confused.

"I did think you rather rude," she admitted. "But what a long time ago that was! Isn't it *strange* that I should remember it? I can even recollect that you and my brother had had a fight in school and that dad made you both shake hands there in the station, before you went aboard the train.... Naturally, I didn't feel kindly toward you," she added, laughingly.

"Jim and I are now on most amiable terms," he assured her, "so please feel kindly toward me now—kindly enough to give me one unimportant dance. Will you, Miss Quest?"

Later when he presented himself to claim the dance, her reception of him was unmistakably friendly.

He had grown up into a spare, loosely coupled, yet rather graceful young fellow, with hair and eyes that matched, both of a deep amber shade.

But there was in his bearing, in his carelessly attractive manner, in his gaze, a lurking hint of irresponsibility, perhaps of mischief, which did not, however, impress her disagreeably.

On the contrary, she felt oddly at ease with him, as though she had known him for some time.

"Have you forgiven me for staring at you so many years ago?" he inquired, smilingly.

She thought that she had.

But his next words startled her a little; he said, still smiling in his careless and attractive way:

"I have a queer idea that we're beginning in the middle of everything—that we've already known each other long enough to waive preliminaries and begin our acquaintance as old friends."

He was saying almost exactly what she had not put into words. He was still looking at her intently, curiously, with the same slightly importunate, slightly deferential smile which she now vividly remembered in the boy.

"Do you, by any chance, feel the same about our encounter?" he asked.

"What way?"

"That we seem to have known each other for a long time?"

Stephanie had not yet learned very much in the art of self-defense. A question to her still meant either a truthful answer or a silence. She remained silent.

"Do you, Miss Quest?" he persisted.

"Yes, I do."

"As though," he insisted, "you and I are beginning in the middle of the book of friendship instead of bothering to cut the pages of the preface?" he suggested gaily.

She laughed.

"You know," she warned him, "that I have not yet made up my mind about you."

"Oh. Concerning what are you in doubt?"

"Concerning exactly how I ought to consider you."

"As a friend, please."

"Perhaps. Are we going to dance or talk?"

After they had been dancing for a few moments:

"So you are a crew man?"

"Who told you?"

"I've inquired about you," she admitted, glancing sideways at the tall, spare, graceful young fellow with his almost golden colouring. "I have questioned various people. They told me things."

"Did they give me a black eye?" he asked, laughingly.

"No. But somebody gave you a pair of golden ones.... Like two sun-spots on a brown brook. You've a golden look; do you know it?"

"Red-headed men turn that way when they're in the sun and wind," he explained, still laughing, yet plainly fascinated by the piquant, breezy informality of this young girl. "Tell me, do you still go to school, Miss Quest?"

"How insulting! ... Yes! But it was mean of you to ask."

"Good Lord! You didn't expect me to think you the mother of a family, did you?"

That mollified her.

"Where do you go to school?" he continued.

"Miss Montfort's. I finish this week."

"And then?"

"To college, I'm afraid."

"Don't you want to?"

"I'd rather go to a dramatic school."

"Is that your inclination, Miss Quest?"

"I'd adore it! But dad doesn't."

"Too bad."

"I don't know. I'm quite happy, anyway. I'm having a wonderful time, whatever I'm doing."

"Then it isn't an imperious call from Heaven to leave all and elevate the drama?" he asked, with a pretense of anxiety that made her laugh.

"You are disrespectful. I'm sure I could elevate the drama if I had the chance. But I sha'n't get it. However, next to the stage I adore to paint," she explained. "There is a class. I have attended it for two years. I paint rather nicely."

"No wonder we feel so friendly," exclaimed Grismer.

"Why? Do *you* paint?"

"No, but I'm to be a sculptor."

"How *wonderful*! I'm simply mad to do something, too! Don't you love the atmosphere of Bohemia, Mr. Grismer?"

He said that he did with a mischievous smile straight into her grey eyes.

"It is my dream," she went on, slightly confused, "to have a studio—not a bit fixed up, you know, and not frilly—but with just one or two wonderful old objects of art here and there and the rest a fascinating confusion of artistic things."

"Great!" he assented. "Please ask me to tea!"

"Wouldn't it be *wonderful*? And of course I'd work like fury until five o'clock every day, and then just have tea ready for the brilliant and interesting people who are likely to drop in to discuss the most wonderful things! Just think of it, Mr. Grismer! Think what a heavenly privilege it must be to live such a life, surrounded by inspiration and—and atmosphere and—and such things—and listening to the conversation of celebrated people telling each other all about art and how they became famous! What a lofty, exalted life! What a magnificent incentive to self-cultivation, attainment, and creative accomplishment! And yet, how charmingly informal and free from artificiality!"

Grismer also had looked forward to a professional career in Bohemia, with a lively appreciation of its agreeable informalities. And the irresponsibility and liberty—perhaps license—of such a life had appealed to him only in a lesser degree

than the desire to satisfy his artistic proclivities with a block of marble or a fistful of clay.

"Yes," he repeated, "that is undoubtedly *the* life, Miss Quest. And it certainly seems as though you and I were cut out for it."

Stephanie sighed, lost in iridescent dreams of higher things—vague visions of spiritual and artistic levels from which, if attained, genius might stoop to regenerate the world.

But Grismer's amber eyes were brilliant with slumbering mischief.

"What do you think of Grismer, Steve?" inquired Jim Cleland, as they drove back to Boston that night, where his father, at the hotel, awaited them both.

"I really don't exactly know, Jim. Do you like him?"

"Sometimes. He's crew, Dicky, Hasty Pudding. He's a curious chap. You've got to hand him that, anyway."

"Cleverness?"

"Oh, more than that, I think. He's an artist through and through."

"Really!"

"Oh, yes. He's a bird on the box, too."

"*What!*"

"On the piano, Steve. He's the real thing. He sings charmingly. He draws better than Harry Beltran. He's done things in clay and wax—really wonderful things. You saw him in theatricals."

"Did I? Which was he?"

"Why, the *Duke of Brooklyn*, of course. He was practically the whole show!"

"I didn't know it," she murmured. "I did not recognize him. How clever he really is!"

"You hadn't met him then," remarked Jim.

"But I had seen him, once," she answered in a low, dreamy voice.

Jim Cleland glanced around at her. Again it struck him that Stephanie was growing up very rapidly into an amazingly ornamental girl—a sister to be proud of.

"Did you have a good time, Steve?" he asked.

"Wonderful," she sighed; smiling back at him out of sleepy eyes.

The car sped on toward Boston.

CHAPTER IX

Stephanie Quest was introduced to society when she was eighteen, and was not a success. She had every chance at her debut to prove popular, but she remained passive, charmingly indifferent to social success, not inclined to step upon the treadmill, unwilling to endure the exactions, formalities, sacrifices, and stupid routine which alone make social position possible. There was too much chaff for the few grains of wheat to interest her.

She wanted a career, and she wanted to waste no time about it, and she was delightfully certain that the path to it lay through some dramatic or art school to the stage or studio.

Jim laughed at her and teased her; but his father worried a great deal, and when Stephanie realized that he was worrying she became reasonable about the matter and said that the next best thing would be college.

"Dad," she said, "I adore dancing and gay dinner parties, but there is nothing else to them but mere dancing and eating. The trouble seems to be with the people—nice people, of course—but——"

"Brainless," remarked Jim, looking over his evening paper.

"No; but they all think and do the same things. They all have the same opinions, the same outlook. They all read the same books when they read at all, go to see the same plays, visit the same people. It's jolly to do it two or three times; but after a little while you realize that all these people are restless and don't know what to do with themselves; and it makes me restless—not for that reason—but because I *do* know what to do with myself—only you, darling——" slipping one arm around John Cleland's neck, "—don't approve."

"Yours is a restless sex, Steve," remarked Jim, still studying the evening paper. "You've all got the fidgets."

"A libel, my patronizing friend. Or rather a tribute," she added gaily, "because only a restless mind matures and accomplishes."

"Accomplishes what? Suffrage? Sex equality? You'll all perish with boredom when you get it, because there'll be nothing more to fidget about."

"He's just a bumptious boy yet, isn't he, Dad?"

Jim laughed and laid aside his paper:

"You're a sweet, pretty girl, Steve——"

"I'll slay you if you call me that!"

"Why not be what you look? Why not have a good time with all your might, marry when you wish, and become a perfectly——"

"Oh, Jim, you *are* annoying! Dad, is there anything more irritating than a freshly hatched college graduate? Or more maddeningly complacent? Look at your self-satisfied son! There he sits, after having spent the entire day in enjoyment of his

profession, and argues that I ought to be satisfied with an idle day in which I have accomplished absolutely nothing! I'm afraid your son is a pig."

Jim laughed lazily:

"The restless sex is setting the world by the ears," he said tormentingly. "All this feminist business, this intrusion into man's affairs, this fidgety dissatisfaction with a perfectly good civilization, is spoiling you all."

"Is that the sort of thing you're putting into your wonderful novel?" she inquired.

"No, it's too unimportant——"

"Dad! Let's ignore him! Now, dear, if you feel as you do about a career for me at present, I really think I had better go to college. I do love pleasure, but somehow the sort of pleasure I'm supposed to enjoy doesn't last; and it's the people, I think, that tire one very quickly. It *does* make a difference in dancing, doesn't it?—not to hear an idea uttered during an entire evening—not to find anybody thinking for themselves——"

"Oh, Steve!" laughed Jim, "you're not expected to think at your age! All that society expects of you is that you chatter incessantly during dinner and the opera and do your thinking in a ballroom with your feet!"

She was laughing, but an unwonted colour brightened her cheeks as she turned on him from the padded arm of John Cleland's chair, where she had been sitting:

"If I really thought you meant that, Jim, I'd spend the remainder of my life in proving to you that I have a mind."

"Never mind him, Steve," said John Cleland. "If you wish to go to college, you shall."

"How about looking after us?" inquired Jim, alarmed.

"Dad, if my being here is going to make *you* more comfortable," she said, "I'll remain. Really, I am serious. Don't you want me to go?"

"Are you really so restless, Steve?"

"Mentally," she replied, with a defiant glance at Jim.

"This will be a gay place to live in if *you* go off for four years!" remarked that young man.

"You don't mean that *you'd* miss me!" she exclaimed mockingly.

"Of course I'd miss you."

"Miss the mental stimulus I give you?"—sweetly persuasive.

"Not at all. I'd miss the mental relaxation you afford my tired brain——"

"You beast! Dad, I'm *going*! And some day your son will find out that it's an *idle* mind that makes a girl restless; not a restless mind that makes her idle!"

"I was just teasing, Steve!"

"I know it." She smiled at the young fellow, but her grey eyes were brilliant. Then she turned and nestled against John Cleland: "I have made up my mind, darling, and I have decided to go to Vassar."

Home, to John Cleland and his son, had come to mean Stephanie as much as everything else under the common roof-tree.

For the background of familiar things framed her so naturally and so convincingly and seemed so obviously devised for her in this mellow old household, where everything had its particular place in an orderly ensemble, that when she actually departed for college, the routine became dislocated, jarring everything above and below stairs, and leaving two dismayed and extremely restless men.

"Steve's going off like this has put the whole house on the blink," protested Jim, intensely surprised to discover the fact.

It nearly finished Janet, whose voice, long afflicted with the cracked tremolo of age, now became almost incoherent at the very mention of Stephanie's name.

Old Lizzie, the laundress, deeply disapproving of Stephanie's departure, insisted on doing her linen and sheer fabrics, and sending a hamper once a week to Poughkeepsie. Every week, also, Amanda, the cook, dispatched cardboard boxes Vassarward, containing condiments and culinary creations which she stubbornly refused to allow Cleland Senior to censor.

"Ay t'ank a leetle yelly-cake and a leetle yar of yam it will not hurt Miss Stephanie," she explained to Cleland. And he said no more.

As for Meacham, he prowled noiselessly about his duties, little, shrunk, round-shouldered, as though no dislocation in the family circle had occurred; but every day since her departure, at Stephanie's place a fresh flower of some sort lay on the cloth to match the other blossom opposite.

In the library together, after dinner, father and son discussed the void which her absence had created.

"She'll get enough of it and come back," suggested Jim, but without conviction. "It's beastly not having her about."

"Perhaps you have a faint idea how it was for me when you were away," observed his father.

"I know. I *had* to go through, hadn't I?"

"Of course.... But—with your mother gone—it was—lonely. Do you understand, now, why I took Steve when I had the chance?"

The young fellow nodded, looking at his father:

"Of course I understand. But I don't see why Steve had to go. She has everything here to amuse her—everything a girl could desire! Why the deuce should she get restless and go flying about after knowledge?"

"Possibly," said John Cleland, "the child has a mind."

"A feminine one. Yes, of course. I tell you, Father, it's all part and parcel of this world-wide restlessness which has set women fidgeting the whole world over. What is it they want?—because they themselves can't tell you. Do you know?"

"I think I do. They desire to exercise the liberty of choice."

"They have it now, haven't they?"

"Virtually. They're getting the rest. If Steve goes through college she will emerge to find all paths open to women. It worries me a little."

Jim shrugged:

"What is it she calls it—I mean her attitude about choosing a career?"

"She refers to it, I believe, as 'the necessity for self-expression.'"

"Fiddle! The trouble with Steve is that she's afflicted with extreme youth."

"I don't know, Jim. She *has* a mind."

"It's a purely imitative one. People she has read about draw, write, compose music. Steve is sensitive to impression, high strung, with a very receptive mind; and the idea attracts her. And what happens? She sees me, for example, scribbling away every day; she knows I'm writing a novel; it makes an impression on her and she takes to scribbling, too."

"Oswald Grismer drops in and talks studio and atmosphere and Rodin and Maniship. That stirs her up. What occurs within twenty-four hours? Steve orders a box of colours and a modelling table; and she smears her pretty boudoir furniture with oil paint and plasticine. And that's all it amounts to, Father, just the caprice of a very young girl who thinks creative art a romantic cinch, and takes a shy at it."

His father, not smiling, said:

"Possibly. But the mere fact that she *does* take a shy at these things—spends her leisure in trying to paint, model, and write, when other girls of her age *don't*, worries me a little. I do not want her to become interested in any profession of an irregular nature. I want Steve to keep away from the unconventional. I'm afraid of it for her."

"Why?"

"Because all intelligence is restless—and Steve is very intelligent. All creative minds desire to find some medium for self-expression. And I'm wondering whether Steve's mind is creative or merely imitative; whether she is actually but blindly searching for an outlet for self-expression, or whether it's merely the healthy mental energy of a healthy body requiring its share of exercise, too."

Jim laughed:

"It's in the air, Father, this mania for 'doing things.' It's the ridiculous renaissance of the commonplace, long submerged. Every college youth, every school girl writes a novel; every janitor, every office boy a scenario. The stage to-day teems with sales-ladies and floor-walkers; the pants-presser and the manufacturer of ladies' cloaks direct the newest art of the moving pictures. Printers' devils and ex-draymen fill the papers with their draughtsmanship; head-waiters write the scores for musical productions. Art is in the air. So why shouldn't Steve believe herself capable of creating a few things? She'll get over it."

"I hope she will."

"She will. Steve is a reasonable child."

"Steve is a sweet, intelligent and reasonable girl.... Very impressionable.... And sensitive.... I hope," he added irrelevantly, "that I shall live a few years more."

"You hadn't contemplated anything to the contrary, had you?" inquired Jim.

They both smiled. Then Cleland Senior said in his pleasant, even way:

"One can never tell.... And in case you and Steve have to plod along without me some day, before either of you are really wise enough to dispense with my invaluable advice, try to understand her, Jim. Try always; try patiently.... Because I made myself responsible.... And, for all her honesty and sweetness and her obedience, Jim, there is—perhaps—restless blood in Steve.... There may even be the creative instinct in her also.... She's very young to develop it yet—to show whether it really is there and amounts to anything.... I should like to live long enough to see—to guide her for the next few years——"

"Of course you are going to live to see Steve's kiddies!" cried the young fellow in cordially scornful protest. "You know perfectly well, Father, that you don't look your age!"

"Don't I?" said Cleland Senior, with a faint smile.

"And you feel all right, don't you, Father?" insisted the boy in that rather loud, careless voice which often chokes tenderness between men. For the memory that these two shared in common made them doubly sensitive to the lightest hint that everything was not entirely right with either.

"Do you feel perfectly well?" repeated the son, looking at his father with smiling intentness.

"Perfectly," replied Cleland Senior, lying.

He had another chat with Dr. Wilmer the following afternoon. It had been an odd affair, and both physician and patient seemed to prefer to speculate about it rather than to come to any conclusion.

It was this. A week or two previous, lying awake in bed after retiring for the night, Cleland seemed to lose consciousness for an interval—probably a very brief interval; and revived, presently, to find himself upright on the floor beside his bed, holding to one of the carved posts, and unable to articulate.

He made no effort to arouse anybody; after a while—but how long he seemed unable to remember clearly—he returned to bed and fell into a heavy sleep. And in the morning when he awoke, the power of speech had returned to him.

But he felt irritable, depressed and tired. That was his story. And the question he had asked Dr. Wilmer was a simple one.

But the physician either could not or would not be definite in his answer. His reply was in the nature of a grave surmise. But the treatment ordered struck Cleland as ominously significant.

CHAPTER X

To any young man his first flirtation with Literature is a heart-rending affair, although the jade takes it lightly enough.

But that muse is a frivolous youngster and plagues her young lovers to the verge of distraction.

And no matter how serious a new aspirant may be or how determined to remain free from self-consciousness, refrain from traditional mental attitudes and censor every impulse toward "fine writing," his frivolous muse beguiles him and flatters him, and leads him on until he has succumbed to every deadly scribbler's sin in his riotous progress of a literary rake.

The only hope for him is that his muse may some day take enough interest in him to mangle his feelings and exterminate his adjectives.

Every morning Jim remained for hours hunched up at his table, fondling his first-born novel. The period of weaning was harrowing. Joy, confidence, pride, excitement, moments of mental intoxication, were succeeded by every species of self-distrust, alarm, funk, slump, and most horrid depression.

One day he felt himself to be easily master of the English language; another day he feared that a public school examination would reveal him as a hopeless illiterate. Like all beginners, he had swallowed the axiom that genius worked only when it had a few moments to spare from other diversions; and he tried it out. The proposition proved to be a self-evident fake.

It was to his own credit that he finally discovered that inspiration comes with preparedness; that the proper place for creative inspiration was a seat at his desk with pencil and pad before him; that the pleasure of self-expression must become a habit as well as a pleasure, and not an occasional caprice to be casually gratified; and that technical excellence is acquired at the daily work-bench alone, and not among the talkers of talk.

So the boy began to form his habit of work; discovered that sooner or later a receptive mind resulted; and, realizing that inspiration came when preparations for its reception had been made, gradually got over his earlier beliefs in the nonsense talked about genius and the commercializing of the same. And so he ceased getting out of bed to record a precious thought, and refrained from sitting up until two in the morning to scribble. He plugged ahead as long as he could stand it; and late in the afternoon he went out to hunt for relaxation, which, except for the creative, is the only other known species of true pleasure.

Except for their conveniences as to lavatories and bars, there are very few clubs in New York worth belonging to; and only one to which it is an honour to belong.

In this club Cleland Senior sat now, very often, instead of pursuing his daily course among print-shops, auction rooms, and private collections of those beautiful or

rare or merely curious and interesting objects which for many years it had been his pleasure to nose out and sometimes acquire.

For now that his son was busy writing for the greater portion of the day, and Stephanie had gone away to college, Cleland Senior gradually became conscious of a subtle change which was beginning within himself—a tendency to relax mentally and physically—a vague realization that his work in life had been pretty nearly accomplished and that it was almost time to rest.

With this conviction came a tendency to depression, inclination for silence and retrospection, not entirely free from melancholy. Not unnoticed by his physician, either, who had arrived at his own conclusions. The medical treatment, however, continued on the same lines sketched out by the first prescriptions, except that all narcotics and stimulants were forbidden.

John Cleland now made it a custom to go every day to his club, read in the great, hushed library, gossip with the older members, perhaps play a game of chess with some friend of his early youth, lunch there with ancient cronies, sometimes fall asleep in one of the great, deep chairs in the lounging hall. And, as he had always been constitutionally moderate, the physician's edict depriving him of his cigar and his claret annoyed him scarcely at all. Always he returned to the home on 80th Street, when his only son was likely to be free from work; and together they dined at home, or more rarely at Delmonico's; and sometimes they went together to some theatre or concert.

For they were nearer to each other than they had ever been in their lives during those quiet autumn and winter days together; and they shared every thought—almost every thought—only Cleland had never spoken to his son about the medicine he was taking regularly, nor of that odd experience when he had found himself standing dazed and speechless by his own bed in the silence and darkness of early morning.

Stephanie came back at Christmas—a lovely surprise—a supple, grey-eyed young thing, grown an inch and a half taller, flower-fresh, instinct with the intoxicating vigour and delight of mere living, and tremulous with unuttered and very youthful ideas about everything on earth.

She kissed Cleland Senior, clung to him, caressed him. But for the first time her demonstration ended there; she offered her hand to Jim in flushed and slightly confused silence.

"What's the matter with you, Steve?" demanded the youth, half laughing, half annoyed. "You think you're too big to kiss me? By Jove, you shall kiss me——!"

And he summarily saluted her.

She got away from him immediately with an odd little laugh, and held tightly to Cleland Senior again.

"Dad darling, darling!" she murmured, "I'm glad I'm back. Are *you*? Do you really *want* me? And I'm going to tell you right now, I don't wish to have you arrange

parties and dinners and dances and things for me. All I want is to be with you and go to the theatre every night——"

"Good Lord, Steve! That's no programme for a pretty little girl!"

"I'm *not*! Don't call me that! I've got a mind! But I *have* got such lots to learn—so many, many things to learn! And only one life to learn them in——"

"Fiddle!" remarked Jim.

"It really isn't fiddle, Jim! I'm just crazy to learn things, and I'm not one bit interested in frivolity and ordinary things and people——"

"You liked people once; you liked to dance——"

"When I was a child, yes," she retorted scornfully. "But I realize, now, how short life is——"

"Fiddle," repeated Jim. "That fool college is spoiling you for fair!"

"Dad! He's a brute! You understand me, darling, don't you? Don't let him plague me."

His arm around her slender shoulder tightened; all three were laughing.

"You don't *have* to dance, Steve, if you don't want to," he said. "Do you consider it frivolous to dine occasionally? Meacham has just announced the possibility of food."

She nestled close to him as they went out to dinner, all three very gay and loquacious, and the two men keenly conscious of the girl's rapid development, of the serious change in her, the scarcely suppressed exuberance, the sparkling and splendid bodily vitality.

As they entered the dining room:

"Oh, Meacham, I'm glad to see you," she cried impulsively, taking the little withered man's hands into both of hers.

There was no reply, only in the burnt-out eyes a sudden mist—the first since his mistress had passed away.

"Dad, do you mind if I run down a moment to see Lizzie and Janet and Amanda? Dear, I'll be right back——" She was gone, light-footed, eager, down the service stairs—a child again in the twinkling of an eye. The two men, vaguely smiling, remained standing.

When she returned, Meacham seated her. She picked up the blossom beside her plate, saw the other at the unoccupied place opposite, and her eyes suddenly filled.

There was a moment's silence, then she kissed the petals and placed the flower in her hair.

"My idea," she began, cheerfully, "is to waste no time in life! So I think I'd like to go to the theatre all the time——"

The men's laughter checked her and she joined in.

"You *do* understand, both of you!" she insisted. "You're tormenting me and you know it! I don't go to the theatre to amuse myself. I go to inform myself—to learn,

study, improve myself in the art of self-expression—Jim, you are a beast to grin at me!"

"Steve, for Heaven's sake, be a human girl for a few moments and have a good time!"

"*That's* my way of having a good time. I wish to go to studios and see painters and sculptors at work! I wish to go to plays and concerts——"

"How about seeing a real author at work, Steve?"

"You?" she divined with a dainty sniff.

"Certainly. Come up any morning and watch genius work a lead-pencil. That ought to educate you and leave an evening or two for dancing——"

"Jim, I positively do not care for parties. I don't even desire to waste one minute of my life. Ordinary people bore me, I tell you——"

"Do I?"

"Sometimes," she retorted, with delighted malice. And turning swiftly to Cleland Senior: "As for you, darling, I could spend every minute of my whole existence with you and not be bored for one second!"

The claret in John Cleland's glass—claret forbidden under Dr. Wilmer's régime—glowed like a ruby. But he could not permit Stephanie to return without that old-fashioned formality.

So John Cleland rose, glass in hand, his hair and moustache very white against the ruddy skin.

"Steve, dear, you and Jim have never brought me anything but happiness—anything but honour to my name and to my roof. We welcome you home, dear, to your own place among your own people: Jim—we have the honour—our little Stephanie! Welcome home!"

The young fellow rose, smiling, and bowed gaily to Stephanie.

"Welcome home," he said, "dearest of sisters and most engaging insurgent of your restless sex!"

That night Stephanie seemed possessed of a gay demon of demonstrative mischief. She conversed with Jim so seriously about his authorship that at first he did not realize that he was an object of sarcastic and delighted malice. When he did comprehend that she was secretly laughing at him, he turned so red with surprise and indignation that his father and Stephanie gave way to helpless laughter. Seated there on the sofa, across the room, tense, smiling, triumphantly and delightfully dangerous, she blew an airy kiss at Jim:

"*That* will teach you to poke fun at me," she said. "You're no longer an object of fear and veneration just because you're writing a book!"

The young fellow laughed.

"*I am* easy," he admitted. "All authors are without honour in their own families. But wouldn't it surprise you, Steve, if the world took my book respectfully?"

"Not at all. That's one of the reasons *I* don't. The opinion of ordinary people does not concern me," she said with gay impudence, "and if your book is a best seller it ought to worry you, Jim."

"You don't think," he demanded sadly, "that there's anything in me?"

"Oh, Jim!"—swiftly remorseful—"I was joking, of course." And, seeing by his grin that he was, too, turned up her nose, regretting too late her hasty and warm-hearted remorse.

"How *common*, this fishing for praise and sympathy!" she remarked disdainfully. "Dad, does he bother you to death trying to read his immortal lines to you at inopportune moments?"

Cleland Senior, in his arm-chair, white-haired, deeply ruddy, had been laughing during the bantering passage at arms between the two he loved best on earth.

He seemed the ideal personification of hale and wholesome age, sound as a bell, very handsome, save that the flush on his face seemed rather heavier and deeper than the usual healthy colour.

"Dad," exclaimed the girl, impulsively, "you certainly are the best-looking thing in all New York! I don't think I shall permit you to go walking alone all by yourself any more. Do you hear me?"

She sprang up lightly, went over and seated herself on the arm of his chair, murmuring close to his face gay little jests, odd, quaint endearments, all sorts of nonsense while she smoothed his hair to her satisfaction, re-tied his evening tie, patted his lapels, and finally kissed him lightly between his eyebrows, continuing her murmured nonsense all the while:

"I won't have other women looking sideways at you—the hussies! I'm jealous. I shall hereafter walk out with you. Do you hear what I threaten?—you very flighty and deceitful man! Steve is going to chaperon you everywhere you go."

John Cleland's smile altered subtly:

"Not *everywhere*, Steve."

"Indeed, I shall! Every step you take."

"No, dear."

"Why not?"

"Because—there is one rather necessary trip I shall have to make—some day——"

A moment's silence; then her arms around his neck:

"Dad!" she whispered, in breathless remonstrance.

"Yes, dear?"

"Don't you—*feel* well?"

"Perfectly."

"Then," fiercely, "don't dare hint such things!"

"About the—journey I spoke of?" he asked, smiling.

"Yes! Don't say such a thing! You are not going!—until I go, too!"

"If I could postpone the trip on your account——"

"*Dad!* Do you want to break my heart and kill me by such jokes?"

"There, Steve, I was merely teasing. Men of my age have a poor way of joking sometimes.... I mean to postpone that trip. Indeed, I do, Steve. You're a handful, and I've got to keep hold of you for a long while yet."

Jim overheard that much:

"A handful? Rubbish!" he remarked. "Send her to bed at nine for the next few years and be careful about her diet and censor her reading matter. That's all Steve needs to become a real grown-up some day."

Stephanie had risen to face the shafts of good-natured sarcasm.

"Suppose," she said, "that I told you I had sent a poem to a certain magazine and that it had been accepted?"

"I'd say very amiably that you are precocious," he replied tormentingly.

"Brute! I *did!* I sent it!"

"They accepted it?"

"I don't know," she admitted, pink with annoyance; "but it won't surprise me very much if they accept it. Really, Jim, do you think nobody else can write anything worth considering? Do you really believe that you embody all the talent in New York? *Do you?*" And, to Cleland Senior: "Oh, Dad, isn't he the horrid personification of everything irritatingly masculine? And I'll bet his old novel is perfectly commonplace. I think I'll go up to his room and take a critical glance at it——"

"Hold on, Steve!" he exclaimed—for she was already going. She glanced over her shoulder with a defiant smile, and he sprang up to follow and overtake her.

But Stephanie's legs were long and her feet light and swift, and she was upstairs and inside his room before he caught her, reaching for the sacred manuscript.

"Oh, Jim," she coaxed, beguilingly, "do let me have one little peep at it, there's a dear fellow! Just one little——"

"Not yet, Steve. It isn't in any shape. Wait till it's typed——"

"I don't care. I can read your writing easily——"

"It's all scored and cross-written and messed up——"

"*Please*, Jim! I'm simply half dead with curiosity," she admitted. "Be an angel brother and let me sit here and hear you read the first chapter—only one little chapter. Won't you?" she pleaded with melting sweetness.

"I—I'd be—embarrassed——"

"What! To have your own sister hear what you've written?"

There was a short silence. The word "sister" was meant to be reassuring to both. To use it came instinctively to her as an inspiration, partly because she had vaguely felt that some confirmation of such matter-of-fact relationship would put them a little more perfectly at their ease with each other.

For they had not been entirely at their ease. Both were subtly aware of that—she had first betrayed it by her offered hand instead of the friendly and sisterly kiss which had been a matter of course until now.

"Come," she said, gaily, "be a good child and read the pretty story to little sister."

She sat down on the edge of his bed; he, already seated at his desk, frowned at the pile of manuscript before him.

"I'd rather talk," he said.

"About what?"

"Anything. Honestly, Steve, I'll let you see it when it's typed. But I rather hate to show anything until it's done—I don't like to have people see the raw edges and the machinery."

"I'm not 'people.' How horrid. Also, it makes a difference when a girl is not only your sister but also somebody who intends to devote her life to artistic self-expression. You can read your story to that kind of girl, I should hope!"

"Haven't you given that up?"

"Given up what?"

"That mania for self-expression, as you call it."

"Of course not."

"What do you think you want to do?" he asked uneasily.

"Jim, you are entirely too patronizing. I don't 'think' I want to do anything: but I *know* I desire to find some medium for self-expression and embrace it as a profession."

That rather crushed him for a moment. Then:

"There'll be time enough to start that question when you graduate——"

"It is *not* a question. I intend to express myself some day. And you might as well reconcile yourself to that idea."

"Suppose you haven't anything worth expressing?"

"Are you teasing?" She flushed slightly.

"Oh, yes, I suppose I am teasing you. But, Steve, neither father nor I want to see you enter any unconventional profession. It's no good for a girl unless she is destined for it by a talent that amounts to genius. If you have that, it ought to show by the time you graduate——"

"You make me simply furious, Jim," she retorted impatiently. "These few months at college have taught me *something*. And, for one thing, I've learned that a girl has exactly as much right as a man to live her own life in her own way, unfettered by worn-out conventions and unhampered by man's critical opinions concerning her behaviour."

"The dickens," he remarked, and whistled softly.

"And, further," she continued warmly, "I am astonished that in this age, when the entire world tacitly admits that woman is man's absolute equal in every respect, that

you apparently still harbour old-fashioned, worn-out and silly notions. You are very far out of date, my charming brother."

"What notions?" he demanded.

"Notions that a girl's mission is to go to parties and dance when she doesn't desire to—that a girl had better conform to the uninteresting and stilted laws of the recent past and live her life as an animated clothes-rack, mind her deportment, and do what nice girls do, and marry and become the mother of numerous offspring; which shall be taught to follow in her footsteps and do the same thing all over again, generation after generation—*ad nauseam*!—— Oh, Jim! I'm not going to live out my life that way and be looked after as carefully as a pedigreed Pekinese——"

"For Heaven's sake——"

"For Heaven's sake—yes!—and in God's name, Jim, it is time that a woman's mind was occupied by something beside the question of clothes and husbands and children!"

The boy whistled softly, stared at her, and she looked at him unflinchingly, with her pretty, breathless smile of defiance.

"I want to live my own life in my own way. Can't I?" she asked.

"Of course——"

"You say that. But the instant I venture to express a desire for any outlet—for any chance to be myself, express myself, seek the artistic means for self-utterance, then you tell me I am unconventional!"

He was silent.

"Nobody hampers *you*!" she flashed out. "You are free to choose your profession."

"But why do *you* want a profession, Steve?"

"Why? Because I feel the need of it. Because just ordinary society does not interest me. I prefer Bohemia."

He said:

"There's a lot of stuff talked about studios and atmosphere and 'urge' and general Bohemian irresponsibility—and a young girl is apt to get a notion that she, also, experiences the 'cosmic urge' and that 'self-expression' is her middle name.... That's all I mean, Steve. You frequently have voiced your desire for a career among the fine arts. Now and then you have condescended to sketch for me your idea of an ideal environment, which appears to be a studio in studio disorder, art produced in large chunks, and 'people worth while' loudly attacking pianos and five o'clock tea——"

"Jim! You are not nice to me.... If I didn't love you with all my heart——"

"It's because I'm fond of you, too," he explained. "I don't want my sister, all over clay or paint, sitting in a Greenwich village studio, smoking cigarettes and frying sausages for lunch! No! Or I don't want her bullied by an ignorant stage director or leered at by an animal who plays 'opposite,' or insulted by a Semitic manager. Is that very astonishing?"

The girl rose, nervous, excited, but laughing:

"You dear old out-of-date thing! We'll continue this discussion another time. Dad's been alone in the library altogether too long." She laughed again, a little hint of tenderness in her gaiety; and extended her hand. He took it.

"Without prejudice," she said. "I adore you, Jim!"

"And with all my heart, Steve. I just want you to do what will be best for you, little sister."

"I know. Thank you, Jim. Now, we'll go and find dad."

They found him. He lay on the thick Oushak rug at the foot of the chair in which he had been seated when they left him.

On his lips lingered a slight smile.

A physician lived across the street. When he arrived his examination was brief and perfunctory. He merely said that the stroke had come like a bolt of lightning, then turned his attention to Stephanie, who seemed to be sorely in need of it.

CHAPTER XI

When such a thing happens to young people a certain mental numbness follows the first shock, limiting the capacity for suffering, and creating its own anodyne.

The mental processes resume their functions gradually, chary of arousing sensation.

Grief produces a chemical reaction within the body, poisoning it. But within that daily visitor to the body, the soul, a profound spiritual reaction occurs which either cripples it or ennoble it eternally.

Many people called and left cards, or sent cards and flowers. Some asked for Jim; among others, Chiltern Grismer.

"M-m-m'yes," he murmured, retaining the young man's hand, "—my friend of many years has left us;—m-m-m'yes, my friend of many years. I am very sorry to hear it; yes, very sorry."

Jim remained passive, incurious. Grismer prowled about the darkened room, alternately pursing up and sucking in his dry and slitted lips. Finally he seated himself and gazed owlishly at the young man.

"And our little adopted sister? How does this deplorable affliction affect her? May I hope to offer my condolences to her also?"

"My sister Stephanie is utterly crushed.... Thank you.... She is very grateful to you."

"M-m-m'yes. May I see her?"

"I am sorry. She is scarcely able to see anybody at present. Her aunt, Miss Quest, is with her."

"M-m-m. After all—but let it remain unsaid—m-m-m'yes, unsaid. So her aunt is with her? M-m-m!"

Jim was silent. Grismer sat immovable as a gargoyle, gazing at him out of unwinking eyes.

"M-m-m'yes," he said. "Grief was his due. My friend of many years was worthy of such filial demonstrations. Quite so—even though there is, in point of fact, no blood relationship between my friend of many years and your adopted sister——"

"My sister could not feel her loss more keenly if she and I had been born of the same mother," said the boy in a dull voice.

"Quite so. M-m-m'yes. Or the same father. Quite so."

"I—I simply can't talk about it yet," muttered the young fellow. "If you'll excuse me——"

"*Quite* so. Far better to talk about other things just at present, m'yes, far wiser. M-m-m—and so the young lady's aunt has arrived? Very suitable, ve-ry suitable and necessary. And doubtless Miss Quest will take up her permanent residence here, in view of the—ah—m-m-m-m'yes!—no doubt of it; no doubt."

"We have not spoken of that."

A moment later Miss Quest entered the room.

"Stephanie is awake and is asking for you," she said. As the young man rose with a murmured excuse. Miss Quest turned and looked at Chiltern Grismer.

"Madame," he began, rising to his gaunt height, "permit me—my name is Grismer——"

"Oh," she interrupted drily, "I've talked you over with the late Mr. Cleland."

"My friend of many years, Madame——"

"We didn't discuss your friendship for each other, Mr. Grismer," she snapped out. "Our subject of conversation concerned money."

"Ma'am?"

"An inheritance, in fact, which, I believe, you allege that you *legally* converted to your own uses," she added, staring at him.

They sustained each other's gaze in silence for a moment.

Then Grismer's large, dry hand crept up over his lips and began a rhythmical massage of the grim jaw.

"My friend of many years and I came to an understanding in regard to the painful matter which you have mentioned," he said slowly.

"Yes?"

"Absolutely, Madame. Out of his abundance, I was given to understand, he had bountifully provided for your niece—m-m-m'yes, bounteously provided. Further, he gave me to understand that you, Madame, out of the abundant wealth with which our Lord has blessed you, had indicated your resolution to provide for the young lady."

There was an uncanny gleam in Miss Quest's eyes. But she said nothing. Grismer, watching her, softly joined the tips of his horny fingers.

"M-m'yes. Quite so. My friend of many years voluntarily assured me that he did not contemplate reopening the unfortunate matter in question—in point of fact, Madame, he gave me his solemn promise never to initiate any such action in behalf of the young lady."

Miss Quest remained mute.

"And John Cleland was right, Madame," continued Grismer in a gentle, persuasive voice, "because any such litigation must prove not only costly but fruitless of result. The unfortunate and undesirable publicity of such a case, if brought to trial, could not vindicate my own rectitude and the righteousness of my cause while gossip and scandal cruelly destroyed the social position which the young lady at present enjoys."

After another silence:

"Well?" inquired Miss Quest, "is there anything more that worries you, Mr. Grismer?"

"Worries me, Madame? I am not disturbed in the slightest degree."

"Oh, yes you are. You are not disturbed over any possible scandal that might affect my niece, but you are horribly afraid of any disgrace to yourself. And that is

why you come into this house of death while your 'friend of many years' is still lying in his coffin! That is why you come prowling to find out whether I am as much a lady in my way as he was a gentleman in his. That's all that disturbs you!"

"Madame——"

"Or, to put it plainer, you want to know whether you have to defend an action, civil perhaps, possibly criminal, charging you with mal-administration and illegal conversion of trust funds. That's all that worries you, isn't it? Well—worry then!" she added venomously.

"Do I understand——"

"No, you *don't* understand, Mr. Grismer. And that's another thing for you to worry over. You don't know what I'm going to do, or whether I am going to do anything at all. You may find out in a week—you may not find out for years. And it is going to worry you every minute of your life."

She marched to the staircase hall:

"Meacham?"

"Ma'am?"

"Mr. Grismer's hat!"

Jim, seated beside the bed where Stephanie lay in the darkened room, her tear-marred face buried in her pillow, heard the front door close. Then silence reigned again in the twilight of the house of Cleland.

Miss Quest peeped into the room, then withdrew. If the young fellow heard her at all he made no movement, so still, so intent had he been since his father's death in striving to visualize the familiar face. And found to his astonishment and grief that he could not mentally summon his father's image before his eyes—could not flog the shocked brain to evoke the beloved features. The very effort was becoming an agony to him.

It began to rain about four o'clock. It rained hard all night long on the resounding scuttle and roof overhead. Toward dawn the rain ceased and the dark world grew noisy. There was a cat-fight on the back fence. The car wheels on Madison Avenue seemed unusually dissonant. Very far away, foggy river whistles saluted the dawn of another day.

There were a great many people at the funeral. God knows the dead are indifferent to such *atroupements macabre*, but it seems to satisfy some morbid requirement in the living—friends, a priest, and a passing bell.

Hoc erat in more majorum: hodie tibi; cras mihi.

The family—Jim, Stephanie and Miss Quest—sat together, as is customary. The church was bathed in tinted sunlight streaming through stained glass and falling over casket and flowers in glowing hues. The dyed splendour painted pew and chancel and stained Stephanie's black veil with crimson. Behind them a discreet but interminable string of many people continued.

When the first creeping note of the organ, ominous and low, grew out of the silence, young Cleland felt Stephanie sway a little and remain resting against his shoulder. After a moment he realized that the girl had lost consciousness; and he quietly passed his arm around her, holding her firmly until she revived and moved again.

As for himself, what was passing before him seemed like a shadow scene enacted behind darkened glass. There was nothing real about it, nothing that seemed to appertain in any way to this dead father who had been a comrade and beloved friend. He looked at the casket, at the massed flowers, at the altar, the surplices. All were foreign to the intensely human father he had loved—nothing here seemed to be in harmony with him—not the crawling vibration of the organ, not the resonant, professional droning of the clergy; not these throngs of unseen people behind his back,—not the black garments he wore; not this slender, sombre, drooping thing of crape seated here close beside him, trembling at intervals, with one black-gloved hand gripping his.

A sullen hatred for it all began to possess him. All this was interrupting him—actually making it harder than ever for him to visualize his father—driving the beloved phantom out from its familiar environment in his heart into unrecognizable surroundings full of caskets, pallid, heavy-scented flowers, surpliced clergymen whose cadenced phrases were accurately timed; whose every move and gesture showed them to be quite perfect in the "business" of the act.

"Hell," he muttered under his breath; and became aware of Stephanie's white face and startled eyes.

"Nothing," he whispered; "only I can't stand this mummary! I want to get back to the library where I can be with father.... He *isn't* in that black and silver thing over there. He isn't in any orthodox paradise. He's part of the sunlight out doors—and the spring air.... He's an immortal part of everything beautiful that ever was. When these people conclude to let him alone, I'll have a chance with him.... You think I'm crazy, Steve?"

Her pale lips formed "No."

They remained silent after that until the end, their tense fingers interlocked. Miss Quest's head remained bowed in the folds of her crape veil.

The drive from the cemetery began through the level, rosy rays of a declining sun, and ended in soft spring darkness full of the cheery noises of populous streets.

Cleland had dreaded to enter the house as they drew near to it; its prospective emptiness appalled him; but old Meacham had lighted every light all over the house; and it seemed to help, somehow.

Miss Quest went with Stephanie to her room, leaving Jim in the library alone.

Strange, irrelevant thoughts came to the boy's mind to assail him, torment him with their futility: he remembered several things which he had forgotten to tell his

father—matters of no consequence which now suddenly assumed agonizing importance.

There in the solitude of the library, he remembered, among other things, that his father would never read his novel, now. Why had he waited, wishing to have it entirely finished before his father should read this first beloved product of his eager pen?

Stephanie found him striding about the library, lips distorted, quivering with swelling grief.

"Oh, Steve," he said, seeing her in the doorway, "I am beginning to realize that I can't talk to him any more! I can't touch him—I can't talk—hear his voice—see——"

"Jim—*don't*——"

"The whole world is no good to me now!" cried the boy, flinging up his arms in helpless resentment toward whatever had done this thing to him.

Whatever had done it offered no excuse.

CHAPTER XII..

The reading of John Cleland's will marked the beginning of the end of the old régime for Stephanie Quest and for James Cleland.

Two short letters accompanied the legal document. All the papers were of recent date.

The letter directed to Jim was almost blunt in its brevity:

MY DEAR SON:

I have had what I believe to have been two slight shocks of paralysis. If I am right, and another shock proves fatal, I wish you, after my death, to go abroad and travel and study for the next two years. At the end of that period you ought to know whether or not you really desire to make literature your profession. If you do, come back to your own country and go to work. Europe is a good school, but you should practise your profession in your native land.

Keep straight, fit, and clean. Keep your head in adversity and in success. Find out what business in life you are fitted for, equip yourself for it, and then go into it with all your heart.

I've left you some money and a good name. And my deep, abiding love. My belief is that death is merely an intermission. So your mother and I will rejoin you when the next act begins. Until then, old chap—good luck!

FATHER.

To Stephanie he wrote:

STEVE, DEAR:

You have been wonderful! I'm sorry I couldn't stay to see you a little further along the path of life. I love you dearly.

Your aunt, Miss Quest, understands my wishes. During the two years that Jim is abroad, Miss Quest is to assume the necessary and natural authority over you. I have every confidence in her. Besides, she is legally qualified to act.

It is her desire and mine that you finish college. But if you really find yourself unhappy there after the term is finished, then it is Miss Quest's belief and mine also that you employ the period that otherwise should have spent at Vassar, in acquiring some regular and legitimate profession so that if ever the need comes you shall be able to take care of yourself.

Miss Quest is inclined to think that a course in hospital training under her direct supervision might prove acceptable to you. This you could have in the institution endowed by Miss Quest at Bayport.

Perhaps such a course may appeal to you more than a college education. If so, I shall not be dissatisfied.

But after that if you still feel that your life's work lies in the direction of artistic self-expression, you will be old enough to follow your own bent, and entitled to employ your opportunities toward that end.

I have left you properly provided for: I leave you and Jim all the love that is in my heart.

This is not the end, Steve, dear. There is no end—just a little rest between the acts for such old actors in life's drama as your dad. Later, you and Jim will join us behind the scenes—my wife and I—and we shall see what we shall see!—my little girl!—my darling.

DAD.

The boy and the girl sat up late in the library that night discussing the two letters which so profoundly concerned them.

Indeed, the old order of things was about to pass away before their dismayed and saddened eyes—eyes not yet accustomed to the burning grief which dimmed them—hearts not yet strengthened for the first heavy responsibilities which they had ever borne.

"I can't bear to leave you, Steve," said the boy, striving to steady his voice. "What are you going to do about college?"

"Well—I—I'll go back to college and finish the term. Dad wanted it."

Neither dreamed of disobeying the desires expressed in the two letters.

"Will you finish college?" he asked.

"I don't know. I want to do what dad wished me to do.... I wonder what a course in hospital training is like?"

"Down there at Bayport?"

"Yes.... After all, that is accomplishing something. And I like children, Jim."

"They're defective children down there."

"Poor little lambs! I—I believe I could do some good—accomplish something. But do you know, Jim, it almost frightens me when I remember that you will be away two years——" She began to weep, lying there in her big chair with her black-edged handkerchief pressed against her face.

"I wish I could take you to Europe, Steve," he said huskily.

She dried her eyes leisurely.

"Couldn't you? No, you couldn't, of course. Dad would have said so if it was what he wanted. Well—then I'll finish the term at Vassar. You won't go before Easter?"

"No, I'll be here, Steve. We'll see each other then, anyway.... Do you think you'll get along with your aunt?"

"I don't know," said the girl. "She means to be kind, I suppose. But dad spoiled me. Oh, Jim! I'm—I'm too unhappy to care what becomes of me now. I'll finish the term and then I'll go and learn how to nurse sick little defective children while you're away——" her voice broke again.

"I wish you wouldn't cry," said the boy;—"I'm—I can't stand it——"

"Oh, forgive me!" She sprang up and flung herself on the rug beside his chair.

"I'm sorry! I'm selfish. I'll do everything dad wished, cheerfully. You'll go abroad and educate yourself by travel, and I'll learn a profession. And some day I'll find out what I really am fitted to do, and then I'll go abroad and study, too."

"You'll be twenty, then, Steve—just the age to know what you really want to do."

She nodded, listlessly, kneeling there beside his chair, her cheek resting on her clasped hands, her grey eyes fixed on the dying coals.

After a long silence she said:

"Jim, I really don't know what I want to do in life. I am not certain that I want to do anything."

"What? Not the stage?"

"No—I'm not honestly sure. *Everything* interests me. I have a craving to see everything and learn about everything in the world. I want to know all there is to know; I'm feverishly curious. I want to see everything, experience everything, attempt everything! It's silly—it's crazy, of course. But there's a restless desire for the knowledge of experience in my heart that I can't explain. I love everything—not any one particular thing above another—but everything. To be great in any one thing would not satisfy me—it's a terrible thing to say, isn't it, Jim!—but if I were a great actress I should try to become a great singer, too; and then a great painter and sculptor and architect——"

"For Heaven's sake, Steve!"

"I tell you I want to know it all, be it all—see, do, live everything that is to be seen, done, and lived in the world——!"

She lifted her head and straightened her shoulders, sweeping the tumbled hair from her brow impatiently: and her brilliant grey eyes met his, unsmiling.

"Of course," she said, "this is not I'm talking. But every hour of my life I'm going to try to learn something new about the wonderful world I live in—try something new and wonderful—live every minute to the full—experience everything.... Do you think I'm a fool, Jim?"

He smiled:

"No, but you make me feel rather unambitious and commonplace, Steve. After all, I merely wish to write a few good novels. That would content me."

"Oh, Jim," she said, "you'll do it, and I'll probably amount to nothing. I'll just be a crazy creature flying about and poking my nose into everything, and stirring it up a little and then fluttering on to the next thing. Like the Bandar-log—that's what I am—just a monkey, enchanted and excited by everything inside my cage and determined to find out what is hidden under every straw."

"Yours is a good mind, Steve," he said, still smiling.

The girl looked up at him wistfully:

"Is it? I wish I knew. I'm going to try to find out. Have I really a good mind? Or is it just a restless one? Anyway, there's no use my trying to be an ordinary girl. I'm

either monkey or genius; and I am convinced that the world was made for me to rummage in."

He laughed.

"Anyway," she said, "I've amused you and cheered you up. Good night, Jim dear."

CHAPTER XIII

Stephanie, looking very slim and young in her deep mourning, went back to college unreconciled and in tears. Jim drove her to the station. They stood together in the Pullman vestibule for a few minutes before the train departed, and she clung to him, both black-gloved hands holding tightly to his shoulders.

"Everything familiar in life seems to be ending," she said tremulously. "I'm not very old yet, and I didn't really wish to begin living seriously so soon—no matter what nonsense I talked about self-expression. All I want now is to get off this train and go back home with you."

"Poor little Steve," he said under his breath. "But it's better for you to return to college. The house would be too sad for you. Go back to college and study hard and play basket ball and skate——"

"Oh, I will," she said desolately. "I'll see the wretched term through. I was merely telling you what I'd rather do—go home and just live there all alone with you."

"You'd become tired of it pretty soon, Steve. Don't you think so?"

They looked at each other intently for a moment, then an odd expression came into the girl's grey eyes:

"It's you who would tire of it, Jim," she said. "I'm not old enough to amuse you yet. I'm still only a child to you."

"What nonsense——!"

"No. You've been wonderful to me. But you are older. I've bored you sometimes."

He protested; but she shook her head.

"A girl knows," she said. "And a man can't make a comrade of a girl who has no experiences to swap with him, no conclusions to draw, none of life's discoveries to compare with his.... Don't look so guilty and distressed; you have always been a perfect dear. But, oh, if you knew how hard I've tried to catch up with you!—how desperately I try to be old enough for you——"

"Steve, you *are* an ideal sister! But you know how it is—when a man has such a lot to think about——"

"I *do* know! And that is exactly what I also am determined to have—a lot to think about!" Her colour was high and her grey eyes brilliant.

"In two years you shall see. I shall be an interesting woman to you when you come back! I vow and declare I shall be interesting enough to be friends with you on equal terms! Wait and see!"

"But, Steve," he protested, smiling, yet bewildered by the sudden fiery animation of the girl, "I never supposed you felt that I condescended—patronized——"

"How could you help it!—a little fool who doesn't know anything!" She was laughing unnaturally, and her nervous fingers tightened and relaxed on his shoulders. "But when you come back after two years' travel, I shall at least be able to take your temperature, and keep you entertained if you're ill——! Oh, Jim, I don't know what

I'm saying! I'm just heart-broken at going away from you. You do care a lot for me, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

"And I promise to be a very interesting woman when you come back from abroad.... Oh, dear, the train is moving. Good-bye, Jim dear!" She flung her veil aside and put both slim arms around his neck in a passion of adoration and farewell.

He dropped to the platform from the slowly moving train and walked back toward the station. And he was uneasily conscious, for the first time in his life, of the innocent abandon of this young girl's embrace—embarrassed by the softness of her mouth—impatient of himself for noticing it.

When he arrived at the house Miss Quest's luggage had gone and that capable and determined lady was ready to depart for Bayport in a large, powerful automobile bearing her monogram, which stood in front of the house.

"Mr. Cleland," she said, "before I go, I have several things to say to you. One is that I like you."

He reddened with surprise, but expressed his appreciation pleasantly and without embarrassment.

"Yes," continued Miss Quest, reflectively, "you're much like your father. He and I began our acquaintance by differing: we ended friends. I hope his son and I may continue that friendship."

"I hope so," he said politely.

"Thank you. But the keynote to friendship is frankness. Shall I sound it?"

"Certainly," he replied, smiling.

"Very well: my niece ought to have a woman companion when she returns from college at Easter."

"Why?" he asked, astonished.

"Because she isn't your sister, and she's an attractive girl."

After a silence she went on:

"I know that you and Stephanie regard each other as brother and sister. But you're not. And the world knows it. It's an absurd world, Mr. Cleland."

"It's rather a rotten world if Steve and I can't live here alone together without gossip," he said hotly.

"Let's take it as we find it and be practical. Shall I look up a companion for Stephanie, or shall I return here at Easter?"

He pondered the suggestion, frowning. Miss Quest said pleasantly:

"Please, I don't mean to interfere. You are of age, and over. But the world, if it cares to think, will remember that you and Stephanie are not related. In two years, when you return from Europe, Stephanie will be twenty and you twenty-four. And, laying aside the suggestion that an older woman's presence might be advantageous under the circumstances, who is going to control Stephanie?"

"Control her?"

"Yes, control, guide, steady her through the most critical period of her life?"

The young fellow, plainly unconvinced, looked at Miss Quest out of troubled eyes.

"Come," she said briskly, "let's have a heart-to-heart talk and find out what's ahead of us. Let's be business-like and candid. Shall we?"

"By all means."

"Then we'll begin at the very beginning:

"Stephanie is a dear. But she's very young. And at twenty she will still be very, very young. What traits and talents she may have inherited from a clever, unprincipled father—my own nephew, Mr. Cleland—I don't know. God willing, there's nothing of him in her—no tendencies toward irregularities; no unmoral inclination to drift, nothing spineless and irresponsible.

"As for Stephanie's mother, I know little about her. I think she was merely a healthy young animal without education, submitting to and following instinctively the first man who attracted her. Which happened to be my unhappy nephew."

She shook her head and gazed musingly at the window where the sunshine fell.

"There are the propositions; this is the problem, Mr. Cleland. Now, let us look at the conditions which bear directly on it. Am I boring you?"

"No," he said. "It's very necessary to consider this matter. I'm just beginning to realize that I'm really not fitted to guide and control Stephanie."

She laughed.

"What a confession! But do you know that, all over the world, men are beginning to come to similar conclusions? Conditions absolutely without precedent have arisen within a few brief years. And Stephanie, just emerging into womanhood, is about to face them. The day of the woman has dawned.

"Ours is a restless sex," continued Miss Quest grimly. "And this is the age of our opportunity. I don't know just what it is that animates my enfranchised sex, now that the world has suddenly flung open doors which have confined us through immemorial ages—each woman to her own narrow cell, privileged only to watch freedom through iron bars.

"But there runs a vast restlessness throughout the world; in every woman's heart the seeds of revolution, so long dormant, are germinating. The time has come when she is to have her fling. And she knows it!"

She shrugged her trim shoulders:

"It is the history of all enfranchisement that license and excess are often misconstrued as freedom by liberated prisoners. To find ourselves free to follow the urge of aspiration may unbalance some of us. Small wonder, too."

She sprang to her feet and began to march up and down in front of the fireplace, swinging her reticule trimmed with Krupp steel. Cleland rose, too.

"What was all wrong in our Victorian mothers' days is all right now," she said, smilingly. "We're going to get the vote; that's a detail already discounted. And we've

already got about everything else except the right to say how many children we shall bring into the world. That will surely come, too; that, and the single standard of morality for both sexes. Both are bound to come. And then," she smiled again brightly at Cleland, "I have an idea that we shall quiet down and outgrow our restlessness. But I don't know."

"What you say is very interesting," murmured the young fellow.

"Yes, it's interesting. It is significant, too. So is the problem of making something out of defectives. After a while there won't be any defectives when we begin to breed children as carefully as we breed cattle. Sex equality will hasten sensible discussion; discussion will result in laws. A, B and C may have babies; D, E and F may not. And, after a few generations, the entire feminine alphabet can have and may have babies. And if, here and there, a baby is not wanted, there'll be no sniveling sectarian conference to threaten the wrath of Mumbo-Jumbo!"

Miss Quest halted in her hearth-rug promenade:

"The doom of hypocrisy, sham and intolerance is already in sight. Hands off and mind your business are written on the wall. So I suppose Stephanie will think we ought to keep our hands off her and mind our business if she wishes to go on the stage or dawdle before an easel in a Washington Mews studio some day."

Her logic made Cleland anxious again.

"The trouble lies in this intoxicating perfume we call liberty. We women sniff it afar, and it makes us restless and excitable. It's a heady odour. Only a level mind can enjoy it with discretion. Otherwise, it incites to excess. That's all. We're simply not yet used to liberty. And *that* is what concerns me about Stephanie—with her youth, and her intelligence, her undoubted gifts and—her possible inheritance from a fascinating rascal of a father.

"Well, that is the girl; there are the conditions; this is the problem.... And now I must be going."

She held out her smartly gloved hand; retained his for a moment:

"You won't sail before Stephanie's Easter vacation?"

"No; I'll probably sail about May first."

"In that case, I'll come on from Bayport, and you won't need to find a companion for Stephanie. After you sail, she'll come to me, anyway."

"For hospital training," he nodded.

"For two years of it. It's her choice."

"Yes, I know. She prefers it to college."

Miss Quest said very seriously:

"For a girl like Stephanie, it will be an excellent thing. It will give her a certain steadiness, a foundation in life, to have a profession on which she may rely in case of adversity. To care for and to be responsible for others develops character. She already seems interested."

"She prefers it to graduating from Vassar."

Miss Quest nodded, then looking him directly in the eyes:

"I want to say one thing. May I?"

"Certainly."

"Then, above all, be patient with Stephanie. Will you?"

"Of course!" he replied, surprised.

"I am looking rather far into the future," continued Miss Quest. "You will change vastly in two years. She will, too. Cherish the nice friendship between you. A man's besetting sin is impatience of women. Try to avoid it. Be patient, even when you differ with her. She's going to be a handful—I may as well be frank. I can see that—see it plainly. She's going to be a handful for me—and you must always try to keep her affections.

"It's the only way to influence any woman. I know my sex. You're a typical man, entirely dependent on logic and reason—or think you are. All men think they are. But logic and reason are of no use in dealing with us unless you have our affections, too. Good-bye. I do like you. I'll come again at Easter."

Alone in the quiet house, with his memories for companions, the young fellow tried to face the future;—tried to learn to endure the staggering blow which his father's death had dealt him,—strove resolutely to shake off the stunned indifference, the apathy through which he seemed to see the world as through a fog.

Gradually, as the black winter months passed, and as he took up his work again and pegged away at it, the inevitable necessity for distraction developed, until at last the deadly stillness of the house became unendurable, driving him out once more into the world of living men.

So the winter days dragged, and the young fellow faced them alone in the sad, familiar places where, but yesterday, he had moved and talked with his only and best beloved.

Perhaps it was easier that way. He had his memories to himself, sharing none. But he did not share his sorrow, either. And that is a thing that undermines.

At first he was afraid that it would be even harder for him when Stephanie returned at Easter. The girl arrived in her heavy mourning, and he met her at the station, as his father used to meet him.

She lifted her rather pale face and passively received her kiss, but held tightly to his arm as they turned away together through the hurrying crowds of strangers.

Each one tried very hard to find something cheerful to talk about; but little by little their narratives concerning the intervening days of absence became spiritless and perfunctory.

The car swung into the familiar street and drew up before the house; Stephanie laid one hand on Jim's arm, stepped out to the sidewalk, and ran up the steps, animated for a moment with the natural eagerness for home. But when old Meacham silently opened the door and her gaze met his:

"Oh—Meacham," she faltered, and her grey eyes filled.

However, she felt her obligations toward Jim; and they both made the effort, at dinner, and afterward in the library, fighting to keep up appearances.

But silence, lurking near, crept in upon them, a living intruder whose steady pressure gradually prevailed, leaving them pondering there under the subdued lamplight, motionless in the depths of their respective armchairs, until endurance seemed no longer possible—and speech no longer a refuge from the ghosts of what-had-been. And the girl, in her black gown, rose, came silently over to his chair, seated herself on the arm, and laid her pale face against his. He put one arm around her, meaning to let her weep there; but withdrew it suddenly, and released himself almost roughly with a confused sense of her delicate fragrance clinging to him too closely.

The movement was nervous and involuntary; he shot a perplexed glance at her, still uneasily conscious of the warmth and subtle sweetness which had so suddenly made of this slender girl in black something unfamiliar to his sight and touch.

"Let's try to be cheerful," he muttered, scarcely understanding what he said.

It was the first time he had ever repulsed her or failed to respond to her in their mutual loneliness. And why he did it he himself did not understand.

He left the arm-chair and went and stood by the mantel, resting one elbow on it and looking down into the coals; she slipped into the depths of the chair and lay there looking at him.

For something in the manner of this man toward her had set her thinking; and she lay there in silence, watching his averted face, deeply intent on her own thoughts, coming to no conclusions.

Yet somehow the girl was aware that, in that brief moment of their grief when she had sought comfort in his brotherly caress and he had offered it, then suddenly repulsed her, a profound line of cleavage had opened between him and her; and that the cleft could never be closed.

Neither seemed to be aware that anything had happened. The girl remained silent and thoughtful; and he became talkative after a while, telling her of his plans for travel, and that he had arranged for keeping open the house in case she and Miss Quest wished to spend any time in town.

"I'll write you from time to time and keep you informed of my movements," he said. "Two years pass quickly. By the time I'm back I'll have a profession and so will you."

She nodded.

"Then," he went on, "I suppose Miss Quest had better come here and live with us."

"I'm not coming back here."

"What?"

"I'm going about by myself—as you are going—to to observe and learn."

"You wish to be foot-free?"

"I do. I shall be my own mistress."

"Of course," he said drily, "nobody can stop you."

"Why should anybody wish to? I shall be twenty-one—nearly; I shall have a profession if I choose to practise it; I shall have my income—and all the world before me to investigate."

"And then what?"

"How do I know, Jim? A girl ought to have her chance. She ought to have her fling, too, if she wants it—just as much as any man. It's the only way she can learn anything. And I've concluded," she added, looking curiously at him, "that it's the only way she can ever become really interesting to a man."

"How?" he demanded. "By having what you call her fling?"

"Yes. Men aren't much interested in girls who know nothing except what men permit them to know. A girl at college said that the one certain source of interest to any man in any woman is his unsatisfied curiosity concerning her. Satisfy it, and he loses interest."

Cleland laughed:

"That's college philosophy," he said.

Stephanie smiled:

"It is what a man doesn't know about a woman that keeps his interest in her stimulated. It isn't her mind which is merely stored with the conventional—the conventional being determined and prescribed by men. It isn't even her character or her traits or her looks which can keep his interest unflagging. What deeply interests a man is an educated, cultivated girl who has had as much experience as he has, and who is likely to have further experience in the world without advice from him or asking his permission. No other woman can hold the interest of a man for very long."

"That's what you've learned at Vassar, is it?"

"It's one of the things," said Stephanie, smiling faintly.

CHAPTER XIV

The boy—for as yet he was only a boy—sailed in May. The girl—who was swiftly stripping from her the last rainbow chiffons of girlhood—was at the steamer to see him off—down from Poughkeepsie for that purpose.

And the instant she arrived he noticed what this last brief absence had done for her; how subtly her maturing self-confidence had altered the situation, placing her on a new footing with himself.

There was a little of the lean, long-legged, sweet-faced girl left: a slender yet rounded symmetry had replaced obvious joints and bones.

"What is it—basket ball?" he inquired admiringly.

"You like my figure?" she inquired guilelessly. "Oh, I've grown up within a month. It's just what was coming to me."

"Nice line of slang they give you up there," he said, laughing. "You're nearly as tall as I am, too. I don't know you, little sister."

"You never did, little brother. You'll be sorry some day that you wasted all the school-girl adoration I lavished on you."

"Don't you intend to lavish any more?" he inquired, laughing, yet very keenly alert to her smiling assurance, which was at the same time humourous, provocative and engaging.

"I don't know. I'm over my girlhood illusions. Men are horrid pigs, mostly. It's a very horrid thing you're doing to me right now," she said, "—going off to have a wonderful time by yourself for the next two years and leaving me to work in a children's hospital! But I mean to make you pay for it. Wait and see."

"If you'll come to Europe with me I'll take you," he said.

"You wouldn't. You'd hate it. You want to be free to prow! So do I, and I mean to some day."

"Why not come now and prow! with me? I'll take care of you."

The girl looked at him with smiling intentness:

"If dad hadn't expressed his wishes, and even if my aunt would let me go, I wouldn't—now."

"Why not?"

"Because I shall do no more tagging after you."

"What?"

"No. And when you return I mean that you shall come and ask my permission to prow! with me.... And if I find you interesting enough I'll let you. Otherwise, I shall prow! by myself or with some other man."

He was laughing, and her face, also, wore a bright and slightly malicious smile.

"You don't believe that's possible, do you, Jim?—a total reversal of our rôles? You think little sister will tag gratefully after you always, don't you? Wouldn't it astonish you if little sister grew up into a desirable and ornamental woman of

independent proclivities and tastes, and with a mind and a will of her own? And, to enjoy her company, you'd have to seek her and prove yourself sufficiently interesting; and that you would have to respect her freedom and individuality as you would any man's!"

"I think, little sister," he said, laughing, "that you've absorbed a vast deal of modern nonsense at Vassar; that you're as pretty as a peach; and that you'll not turn into a maid errant, but will become an ornament to your sex and to society, and that you'll marry in due time and do yourself proud."

"In children, you mean? Numerically?"

"Quantitatively and qualitatively. Also, you'll do yourself proud in the matronly example you'll set to all women of this great Republic."

"That's what you think, is it?"

"I know it."

She smiled:

"Watch the women of my generation, Jim—when you can spare a few moments of your valuable time from writing masterpieces of fiction."

"I certainly shall. I'll study 'em. They're material for me. They *are* funny, you know."

"They are, indeed," she said, her grey eyes full of malice, "funnier than you dream of! You are going to see a generation that will endure no man-devised restrictions, submit to no tyrannical trammels, endure no masculine nonsense. You'll see this new species of woman coming faster and faster, thicker and thicker, each one knowing her own mind or intent on knowing it. You'll see them animated by a thousand new interests, pursuing a thousand new vocations, scornful of masculine criticism, impervious to admonition, regardless of what men think and say and do about it.

"That's what you'll see, Jim, a restless sex destroying their last barriers; a world of women contemptuous of men's opinions, convinced of their own rights, going after whatever they want, and doing it in their own way.

"If they wish to marry and bother with children they'll pick out a healthy man and do it; if not, they won't. Love plays a very, very small part in a man's life. Love, sentiment, domesticity, and the nursery were once supposed to make up a woman's entire existence. Now the time is coming very swiftly when love will play no more of a rôle in a woman's life than it does in a man's. She'll have her fling, first, if she chooses, just as freely as he does. And some day, if she finds it worth the inconvenience, she'll marry and take a year or two off and raise a few babies. Otherwise, decidedly not!"

"These are fine sentiments!" he exclaimed, laughing, yet not too genuinely amused. "I'm not sure that I'd better go and leave you here with that exceedingly pretty little head of yours stuffed and seething with this sort of propaganda!"

"You might as well. The whole world is beginning to seethe with it. After all, what does it mean except equality of the sexes? Hands off—that's all it means."

"Are you a suffragette, Steve?" he inquired, smilingly.

"Oh, Jim, that's old stuff! Everybody is. All that is merely a matter of time, now. What interests us is our realization of our own individual independence. Why, I can't tell you what a delightful knowledge it is to understand that we can do jolly well what we please and not care a snap of our fingers for masculine opinion!"

"That's a fine creed," he remarked. "What a charming bunch you must be training with at Vassar! I think I'll get off this steamer and remain here for a little scientific observation of your development and conduct."

"No use," she said gaily. "I've promised to learn to be a hospital nurse. After that, perhaps, if you return, you'll find me really worth observing."

"Is that a threat, Steve?" he asked, not too sincerely amused, yet still taking her and her chatter with a lightness and amiable condescension entirely masculine.

"A threat?"

"Yes. Do you mean that when I return I shall find my little sister a handful?"

"A handful? For whose hand? Jim, dear, you are old-fashioned. Girls aren't on or in anybody's hands any more after they're of age. Do you think you'll be responsible for me? Dear child, we'll be comrades or nothing at all to each other. You really must grow up, little brother, before you come back, or I'm afraid—much as I love you—I might find you just a little bit prosy——"

The call for all ashore silenced her. She stood confronting Cleland with high colour and pretty, excited grey eyes, for a moment more, then the gay defiance faded in her face and her attitude grew less resolute.

"Oh, Jim!" she said under her breath, "—I adore you——" And melted into his embrace.

As he held her in his arms, for a moment the instinct to repel her and disengage himself came over him swiftly. A troubled idea that her lips were very soft—that he scarcely knew this girl whose supple figure he held embraced, left him mute, confused.

"Dear Jim," she whimpered, "I love you dearly. I shall miss you dreadfully. I'll always be your own little sister Steve, and you can come back and bully me and I'll tag after you and adore you. Oh, Jim—Jim—my own brother—my own—my *own*——!"

It was a bright, sunny, windy May day. He could still distinguish her in her black gown on the crowded pier which was all a-flutter with brilliant gowns and white handkerchiefs.

After the distant pier had become only a square of colour like a flower-bed, he still stood on the hurricane deck of the huge liner looking back at where he had last seen her. The fragrance of her still clung to him—seemed to have been inhaled somehow and to have subtly permeated him—something of the warm, fresh, pliant

youth of her—unspoiled, utterly unawakened to anything more delicate or complex than the frank, vigorous passion of her affection.

Yet, as her breathless, tearful lips had clung to his, so the perfume of the embrace clung to him still, leaving him perplexed, vaguely disturbed, yet intensely conscious of new emotion, unfamiliar in his experience with this girl who yesterday had been what she always had been to him—a growing child to be affectionately looked after and chivalrously cherished and endured.

"I couldn't be in love with Steve," he said to himself incredulously. The thought amazed and exasperated him. "I'm a fine sort of man," he thought bitterly, "if I can't kiss Steve as innocently as she kisses me. There's something wrong with me. I must be a sort of dog—or crazy——"

He went below.

Stephanie went back in the car, alone. She staunched her tears with her black-edged handkerchief until they ceased to fill the wonderful grey eyes.

Later, detaching the limousine hand-mirror, she inspected her countenance, patted her chestnut-tinted hair, smoothed out her mourning veil, and then, in order, lay back in the corner of the car and gave herself up to passionate memory of this boy whom she had adored from the first moment she ever laid eyes on him.

Two years' absence? She tried to figure to herself what that meant, but could not compass it. It seemed like a century of penance to be endured, to be lived through somehow.

She wanted him dreadfully already. She had no pride left, no purpose, no threats. She just wanted to tag after him—knowing perfectly well that there could be no real equality of comradeship where youth and inexperience fettered her. She didn't care; she wanted him.

No deeper sentiment, nothing less healthy and frank than her youthful adoration for him, disturbed her sorrow. The consanguinity might have been actual as far as her affections had ever been concerned with him.

That she had, at various intervals, made of him a romantic figure, altered nothing. Stainlessly her heart enshrined him; he was her ideal, hers; her brother, her idol, her paladin—the incarnation of all that was desirable and admirable in a boy, a youth, a young man. Never in all her life had any youth interested her otherwise—save, perhaps, once—that time she had met Oswald Grismer after many years, and had danced with him—and was conscious of his admiration. That was the only time in her life when her attitude toward any man had been not quite clear—not entirely definable. She wrote many pages to Cleland that night. And cried herself to sleep.

The next day her aunt came up from Bayport. And, a week later, she went away to Bayport with Miss Quest to begin what seemed to her an endless penance of two years' hospital training.

The uniform was pink with white cuffs, apron, and cap. She never forgot the first blood that soiled it—from a double mastoid operation on a little waif of twelve who

had never been able to count more than six. She held sponges, horrified, crushing back the terror that widened her grey eyes, steeling herself to look, summoning every atom of strength and resolution and nerve to see her through.

They found her lying across the corridor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XV

The usual happened to James Cleland; for the first two months in Paris he was intensely lonely. Life in an English-speaking pension near the Place de l'Etoile turned out to be very drab and eventless after he returned to his rooms, fatigued from sight-seeing and exploration. The vast silver-grey city seemed to him cold, monotonously impressive and oppressive; he was not in sympathy with it, being totally unaccustomed to the splendour of a municipal ensemble with all its beauty of reticence and good taste. The vast vistas, the subdued loveliness of detail, the stately tranquillity of this capital, he did not understand after the sham, the ignorance, the noisy vulgarity of his native municipality.

Here were new standards; the grey immensity of the splendid capital gave him, at first, an impression of something flat and almost featureless under the horizon-wide sweep of sky. There were no sky-scrapers. With exquisite discretion, Notre Dame dominated the east, the silvery majesty of the Pantheon the south; in the west the golden bubble of the Invalides burned; the frail tracery of the Eiffel Tower soared from the city's centre.

And for the first two months he was an alien here, depressed, silenced, not comprehending, oblivious of the subtle atmosphere of civil friendliness possessing the throngs which flowed by him on either hand, unaware that he stood upon the kindly hearthstone of the world itself, where the hospitable warmth never grew colder, where the generous glow was for all.

He went to lectures at the Sorbonne; he attended a class in philology in the Rue des Ecoles; he studied in the quiet alcoves of the great Library of Ste. Genevieve; he paced the sonorous marble pavements of the Louvre. And the austere statues seemed to chill him to the soul.

All was alien to him, all foreign; the English-speaking landlady of his pension, with her eternal cold in the head and her little shoulder shawl; the dreary American families from the Middle West who gathered thrice a day at the pension table; passing wayfarers he saw from the windows; red-legged soldiers in badly fitting uniforms, priests in shovel hats and black soutanes, policemen slouching by under cowled cloaks, their bayonets dangling; hatless, chattering shop girls, and the uninteresting types of civilian citizens; men in impossible hats and oddly awful clothes; women who all looked smart from the rear and dubious from the front.

He found an annoying monotony in the trees of the Bois, a tiresome sameness in square and circle and park and boulevard. He found the language difficult to understand, more difficult to speak. Food, accommodations, the domestic régime, were not to his liking. French economies bored him.

At lectures his comrades seemed merely superficially polite and not very desirable as acquaintances. He felt himself out of place, astray from familiar things,

out of touch with this civilization, out of sympathy with place and people. He was intensely lonely.

In the beginning he wrote to Stephanie every other day. That burst of activity lasted about two months.

Also, in his rather dingy and cheerless suite of rooms, he began a tragedy in five acts and a pessimistic novel called "Out of the Depths." Also, he was guilty of a book of poems called "Day Dreams."

He missed his father terribly; he missed his home; he missed the noisy, grotesque, half-civilized and monstrous city of his nativity. And he missed Stephanie violently.

He told her so in every letter. The more letters he wrote the warmer grew this abrupt affection for her. And, his being a creative talent, with all its temperamental impulses, exaggerations and drawbacks, he began to evolve, unconsciously, out of Stephanie Quest a girl based on the real girl he knew, only transcendently endowed with every desirable and ornamental quality abstractly favoured by himself.

He began to create an ideal Stephanie to comfort him in his loneliness; he created, too, a mutual situation and a sentimental atmosphere for them both, neither of which had existed when he left America.

But now, in his letters, more and more this romantic and airy fabric took shape. Being young, and for the first time in his life thrown upon his own resources—and, moreover, feeling for the first time the pleasures of wielding an eloquent, delicate and capricious pen to voice indefinable aspirations, he began to lose himself in romantic subtleties, evoking drama out of nothing, developing it by implication and constructing it with pensive and capricious humour hinting of dreamy melancholy.

Until the Stephanie Quest of his imagination had become to him the fair, and exquisitely indifferent little renaissance figure of his fancy; and he, somehow or other, her victim. And the more exquisite and indifferent he created her, the more she fascinated him, until he completely hypnotized himself with his own cleverly finished product.

A letter from her woke him up more or less, jolting him in his trance so that the jingle and dissonance of the real world filled, for a moment, his enchanted ears.

DEAR JIM:

Your letters perplex me more and more, and I don't know at all how to take them. Do you mean you are in love with me? I can't believe it. I read and re-read your last three letters—such dear, odd, whimsical letters!—so wonderfully written, so full of beauty and of poetry.

They do almost sound like love-letters—or at least as I imagine love-letters are written. But they can't be! *How* can they be?

And first of all, even if you meant them that way, I don't know what to think. I've never been in love. I know how I feel about you—have always felt. You know, too.

But you never gave me any reason to think—and I never dreamed of thinking anything like *that* when you were here. It never occurred to me. It would not occur to

me now except for your very beautiful letters—so unlike you—so strangely sad, so whimsical, so skillful in wonderful phrases that they're like those vague prose poems you sent me, which hint enough to awaken your imagination and set you aflame with curiosity.

But you *can't* mean that you're in love with me. I should be too astonished. Besides, I shouldn't know what to do about it. It wouldn't seem real. I never have thought of you in such a way.

What makes a girl fall in love? Do you know? Could she fall in love with a man through his letters because they are so beautiful and sad and elusive, so full of charm and mystery? I'm in love with *them*. But, Jim, I don't know what to think about you. I'd have to see you again, first, anyway. You are such a dear boy! I can't seem to think of you that way. You know it's a different kind of love, ours. All I can think about it is the tremendous surprise—if it's true.

But I don't believe it is. You are lonely; you miss dad—miss me, perhaps. I think you do miss me, for the first time in your life. You see, I have rather a clear mind and memory, and I can't help remembering that when you were here you certainly could not have felt that way toward me; so how can you now? I did bore you sometimes.

Anyway, I adore you with all my heart, as you know. My affection hasn't changed one bit since I was a tiny girl and came into your room that day and saw you down on the floor unpacking your suit-case. I adored you instantly. I have not changed. Girls don't change.

Another letter from her some months later:

You're such a funny boy—just a boy, still, while in these six months I've overtaken and passed you in years. You won't believe it, but I have. Maturity has overtaken me. I am really a real woman.

Why are your letters vaguely reproachful? Have I done anything? Were you annoyed when I asked you whether you meant me to take them as love letters? You didn't write for a month after that. Did I scare you? You *are* funny!

I do really think you *are* in love—not with me, Jim—not with any other particular girl—but just in love with love. Writers and artists and poets are inclined to that sort of thing, I fancy.

That's what worries me about myself; I am not inclined that way; I don't seem to be artistic enough in temperament to pay any attention to sentiment of that sort. I don't desire it; I don't miss it; it simply is not an item in the list of things that interest me. But of all things in the world, I do adore friendship.

I had an afternoon off from the hospital the other day—I'm still a probationer in a pink and white uniform, you know—and I went up to town and flew about the shops and lunched with a college friend, Helen Davis, at the Ritz and had a wonderful time.

And who do you suppose I ran into? Oswald Grismer! Jim, he certainly is the best-looking fellow—such red-gold hair,—such fascinating golden eyes and colouring.

We chatted most amiably and he took us to tea, and then—I suppose it wasn't conventional—but we went to his studio with him, Helen Davis and I.

He *is* the cleverest man! He has done a delightful fountain and several portrait busts, and a beautiful tomb for the Lidsey family, and his studies in wax and clay are wonderful!

He really seems very nice. And the life he leads is heavenly! Such a wonderful way to live—just a bed-room and the studio.

He's going to give a little tea for me next time I have an afternoon off, and I'm to meet a lot of delightful, unconventional people there—painters, writers, actors—people who have *done* things!—I'm sure it will be wonderful.

I have bought five pounds of plasticine and I'm going to model in it in my room every time I have a few moments to myself. But oh, it does smell abominably, and it ruins your finger nails.

After that, Oswald Grismer's name recurred frequently in her letters. Cleland recognized also the names of several old schoolmates of his as figuring at various unconventional ceremonies in Grismer's studio—Harry Belter, now a caricaturist on the New York *Morning Star*; Badger Spink, drawing for the illustrated papers; Clarence Verne, who painted pretty girls for the covers of popular magazines, and his one-time master, Phil Grayson, writer for the better-class periodicals.

It's delightful, she wrote; we sometimes have music—often celebrated people from the Metropolitan Opera drop in and you meet everybody of consequence you ever heard of outside the Social Register—people famous in their professions—and it is exciting and inspiring and fills me with enthusiasm and desire to amount to something.

Of course there are *all* kinds, Jim; but I'm old enough and experienced enough to know how to take care of myself. Intellectuals are, of course, broad, liberal and impatient of petty conventions: they live for their professions, regardless of orthodox opinion, oblivious of narrow-minded Philistines.

The main idea is to be tolerant. That is the greatest thing in the world, tolerance. I may not care to smoke cigarettes myself or drink cocktails and highballs, but if another girl does it it's none of my business. That is the foundation of the unconventional and intellectual world—freedom and tolerance of other people's opinions and behaviour. *That* is democracy!

As for the futurists and symbolists of various schools, I am not narrow enough, I hope, to ridicule them or deny them the right to self-expression, but I am not in sympathy with them. However, it is most interesting to listen to their views.

Well, these delightful treats are rare events in my horridly busy life. I'm in the infirmary and the hospital almost all the time; I'm always on duty or studying or attending lectures and clinics. I don't faint any more. And the poor little sufferers fill my heart with sympathy. I do love children—even defective ones. It makes me furious

that there should be any. We must regulate this some day. And regulate birth control, too.

It is interesting; I am rather glad that I shall have had this experience. As a graduate nurse, some day, I shall add immensely to my own self-respect and self-confidence. But I should never pursue the profession further; never study medicine; never desire to become a professional physician. The minute I graduate I shall rent a studio and start in to find out what most properly shall be my vehicle for self-expression.

I forgot to tell you that Oswald Grismer's father and mother are dead within a week of each other. Pneumonia! Poor boy, he is stunned. He wrote me. He won't give any every second to creative work without a thought of financial gain.

Harry Belter is such a funny, fat man. He asks after you every time I meet him. I sent you some of his cartoons in the *Star*. Badger Spink is an odd sort of man with his big, boyish figure and his mass of pompadour hair and his inextinguishable energy and amazing talent. He draws, draws, draws all the time; you see his pictures in every periodical; yet he seems to have time for all sorts of gaiety, private theatricals, dances, entertainments. He belongs to the Players, the Ten Cent Club, the Dutch Treat, Illustrators, Lotus, Coffee House, Two by Four—and about a hundred others—and I think he's president of most of them. He *always* sends his regards to you and requests to know whether you're not yet fed up with Latin Quarter stuff—whatever that means!

And Clarence Verne always mentions you. Such a curious man with a face like Pharaoh, and Egyptian hands, too, deeply cut in between thumb and forefinger like the hands of people sculptured in bas reliefs on Egyptian tombs.

But such lovely girls he paints!—so exquisite! He is a very odd man—with a fixed gaze, and speaks as though he were a trifle deaf—or drugged, or something....

You haven't said much about yourself, Jim, in your last letters; and also your letters arrive at longer and longer intervals.

Somehow, I think that you are becoming reconciled to Paris. I don't believe you feel very lonely any longer. But *what* do you do to amuse yourself after your hours of work are ended? And who are your new friends over there? For, of course, you must have made new friends—I don't mean the students whose names you have occasionally mentioned. Haven't you met any nice girls?

He did not mention having met any girls, nice or otherwise, when he wrote again. He did say that he was enjoying his work and that he had begun to feel a certain affection for Paris—particularly after he had been away travelling in Germany, Spain and Italy. Really, he admitted, it was like coming home. The usual was still happening to James Cleland.

He had an apartment, now, overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens. He had friends to dinner sometimes. There was always plenty to do. Life had become very inspiring. The French theatres were a liberal education; French literature a miracle of artistic clarity and a model for all young aspirants. In fact, the spring source of all art was

France, and Paris the ornamental fountain jet from which flashed the ever-living waters that all may quaff.

Very pretty. He did not add that some of the waters were bottled and kept in pails of chopped ice. He wrote many gracefully composed pages—when he wrote at all—concerning the misty beauty of the French landscape and the effect of the rising sun of Notre Dame. He had seen it rise several times.

But, on the whole, he behaved discreetly and with much circumspection; and within his youthful heart lay that deathless magic of the creative mind which transmutes leaden reality into golden romance—which is blind to the sordid and which transforms it into the picturesque.

A saucy smile from a pretty girl on an April day germinated into a graceful string of verses by night; a chance encounter by the Seine, a laugh, a gay adieu—and a delicate short story was born, perhaps to be laboured over and groomed and swaddled and nourished into life—or to be abandoned, perhaps, in the back yard of literary débris.

Life ran evenly and pleasantly for Cleland in those deathless days—light, happy, irresponsible days when idleness becomes saturated with future energy unawares; when the seeds of inspiration fall thicker and thicker and take root; when the liberality, the vastness, and the inspiration of the world begin to dawn upon a youthful intellect, not oppressively, but with a wide and reassuring kindliness.

There was a young girl—very pretty, whose loneliness made her not too conventional. After several encounters on the stairs, she smiled in response; and they crossed the Luxembourg Gardens together, strolling in the chestnut shade and exchanging views of life.

The affair continued—charming and quite harmless—a touch of tragedy and tears one evening—and the boy deeply touched and temporarily in love—in love with love, temporarily embodied in this blue-eyed, white-skinned, slender girl who had wandered with him close to the dead line and was inclined to cross it—with him.

He had a delightfully wretched hour of renunciation—and was rewarded with much future material, though he didn't know it at the time.

There were tears—several. It is not certain that she spiritually appreciated the situation. That sort of gratitude seldom is genuine in the feminine heart.

But such things are very real to the creative mind, and Cleland was far too unhappy to sleep—deeply wallowing in martyrdom. Fate laughed and pinned this little episode on the clothes-line to dry out with the others—quite a little line-full, now, all fluttering gaily there and drying in the sun. And after a proper interval Cleland went about the business of washing out a few more samples of experience in the life and manners and customs of his time, later to be added to the clothes-line wash.

He had to prod himself to write to Stephanie. He was finding it a little difficult to discover very much to say to her. In youth two people grow apart during absence much faster than they grow together when in each other's company.

It was so with Cleland and Stephanie—less so with her.

Not seeing her for nearly two years left him with the unconscious impression that she had not altered during that period—that she was still the same young girl he had left, no more mature, no more experienced, little wiser.

Her letters were interesting but he had lost touch, in a measure, with interests and people at home. He had adapted himself to the new angle of vision, to the new aspect of life, to new ideals, new aspirations. He was at the source of inspiration, drinking frequently at times, always unconsciously absorbing.

At the end of the two years he had no desire to return to New York.

A series of voluminous letters passed between him and Stephanie and between him and Miss Quest.

He had plenty of excuses for remaining another year; his education was not completed; he needed a certain atmosphere and a certain environment which could be enjoyed only in Europe.

Of course, if he were needed in New York, etc., etc. No, he wasn't needed. Matters could be attended to. The house in 80th Street ought to be closed as it was a useless expense to keep the servants there.

Poor old Meacham had died; Janet, too, was dead; Lizzie had gone back to Ireland. The house in town should, therefore, be closed and wired; and the house in the country, "Runner's Rest," should remain closed and in charge of the farmer who had always looked out for it.

This could be attended to; no need of his coming back.

So he wrote his directions to Stephanie and settled down again with a sigh of relief to the golden days which promised.

His work, now deeply coloured by Gallic influence and environment, had developed to that stage of embryonic promise marred by mannerisms and affectations. His style, temporarily spoiled by a sort of Franco-American jargon, became involved in the swamps of psychological subtleties, emerging jerkily at times, or relapsing into Debussy-like redundancy.

Nobody wanted his short stories, his poems, his impressions. Publishers in London and in America returned "Day Dreams" and "Out of the Depths" with polite regrets. He sounded every depth of despondency and self-distrust; he soared on wings of hope again, striving to keep his gaze on the blinding source of light, only to become confused and dazzled in the upper oceans and waver and flutter and come tumbling down, frantically beating the too rarified atmosphere with unaccustomed wings.

Nobody could tell him. He had to find out the way. He had within him what was worth saying; had not yet learned how to say it. The massed testimony of the masters lay heavily undigested within him; he was too richly fed, stuffed; the intricacies and

complexities of technique worried and disheartened him; he felt too keenly, too deeply to keep a clear mind and a cool one.

Every sense he possessed was necessary to him in his creative work; emotion, intense personal sympathy with his characters, his theme, clogged, checked and halted inspiration, smothering simplicity and clarity. This was a phase. He had the usual experience. He struggled through it and onward.

Stephanie wrote that she had graduated, but that as her aunt was ill she would remain for the present at the hospital.

He felt that he ought to go back. And did not. He was in a dreadfully involved dilemma with his new novel, "Renunciation"—all about a woman—one of the sort he never had met—and no wonder he was in a mess! Besides that, and in spite of the gaily coloured line of rags fluttering on the clothes-line of experience, he knew very little about women. One day, when he came to realize that he knew nothing at all about them, he might begin to write about them, convincingly and acceptably. But he was not yet as far along as that in his education.

He had a desperate affair with an engaging woman of the real world—a countess. She took excellent care of herself, had a delightful time with Cleland, and, in gratitude, opened his eyes to the literary morass in which he had been wading.

Clear-minded, witty, charming, very lovely to look upon, she read and criticised what he wrote, discussed, consulted, advised, and, with exquisite tact, divining the boy's real talent, led him deftly to solid land again. And left him there, enchanted, miserable, inspired, heart-broken, with a laughing admonition to be faithful to her memory while she enjoyed her husband's new post at the Embassy in Sofia.

He wrote, after her departure, a poem simple enough for a child to understand. And tucked it away with a ribbon and a dried flower in his portfolio. It was the first good thing he had ever written. But he remained unconscious of the fact for a long time.

Besides, other matters were bothering him, in particular a letter from Miss Quest: I am not well. I shall not be better. Still, there is no particular hurry about your returning.

Stephanie remains with me very loyally. She has graduated; she is equipped with a profession. She has turned into a very lovely woman to look upon.

But that sex restlessness which now overwhelmingly obsesses the world, possesses her. Freedom from all restraint, liberty to work out and accomplish her own destiny, contempt of convention, utter disregard of established formality, and hostility to custom, enroll her among the vast army of revolutionists now demanding a revision of all laws and customs made by one sex alone to govern the conduct of both.

You and I once conversed on this subject, if you remember. I told you what I feared. And it has happened: Stephanie has developed along radical lines. With everything revolutionary in the world-wide feminist movement she is in sympathy. Standards that have been standards are no longer so to her. To the world's

conservatism she is fiercely and youthfully hostile; equality, tolerance, liberty are the only guide-posts she pretends to recognize.

I shall not live to see the outcome of this world-wide propaganda and revolt. I don't want to. But, in my opinion, it takes a strong character, already accustomed to liberty, to keep its balance in this dazzling flood let in by opening prison doors....

I have left Stephanie what property I have outside of that invested and endowed to maintain my Home for Defective Children. Securities have shrunk; it is not much. It may add four thousand dollars to her present income.

Mr. Cleland, you and Stephanie have gradually and very naturally grown apart since your absence. I don't know what you have developed into. But you were a nice boy.

Stephanie is a beautiful, willful, intelligent, and I fear slightly erratic woman, alive with physical and mental vigour, restless and sensitive under pressure of control, yet to be controlled through her affections first, and only afterward through her reason.

These are unconventional times; a new freedom is dawning, and to me the dawn seems threatening. I am too old, too near my end not to feel that the old régime, with all its drawbacks, was safer for women, productive of better results, less hazardous, less threatening.

But I don't know: I am old-fashioned except in theory. I have professed the creed of the new feminism; I have in my time—and very properly—denounced the tyranny and selfishness and injustice of man-made laws which fetter and cripple my sex.

But—at heart—and with not very many days left to me—at heart I am returning rather wearily along the way I came toward what, now to me, seems safer. It may be only the notions of an old woman, very tired, very sad, conscious of failure, and ready to rest and leave the responsibility where it originated and where it belongs. I don't know. But I wish Stephanie were not alone in the world.

Miss Quest died before the letter reached him. Stephanie's next letter informed him of all the details. She continued:

No use your coming back until you are quite ready, Jim. There's nothing for you to do.

I've taken a studio and apartment with Helen Davis, the animal sculptor. I don't yet know just what I shall do. I'm likely to try several things before I know what I ought to stick to.

Don't feel any absurd sense of responsibility for me. That would be too silly. Feel free to remain abroad as long as it suits you. I also feel absolutely free to go and come as I please. That's the best basis for our friendship, Jim, and, in fact, the necessary and vital basis. My affection is unaltered, but, somehow, it has been such a long time that you seem almost unreal to me.

He did not sail at once. After all, in the face of such an unmistakable declaration of independence, it did not seem worth while for him to arouse himself from the

golden lethargy of enchantment and break the spell of Europe which held him content, amid the mellow ripeness of her capitals and the tinted splendour of her traditions.

He wrote frequently for a few months. Then his letters lagged.

Once his pretty Countess had warned him that, for an American, Europe was merely the school-room but his own country was the proper and only place for creative labour.

He remembered this at intervals, a little uneasy, a trifle conscious-stricken because he shrank from making an end to preparation—because he still loitered, disinclined to break the golden web and return to the clear, shadowless skies and the pitiless sun of the real world where he belonged, and where alone, he knew, was the workshop for which he had been so leisurely preparing.

Then the shock came—the bolt out of the blue.

The cablegram said:

I married Oswald Grismer this morning.

STEPHANIE.

CHAPTER XVI

He sailed in April. When he sailed, he knew he would not come back for many years, if ever. His business here was done, the dream of Europe ended. The cycle of Cathay awaited him in all its acrid crudity.

Yes, the golden web was rent, torn across, destroyed. The shock to his American mind left nothing of the lotus eater in him. He was returning where he belonged.

Married! Steve married! To Oswald Grismer, who, save as a schoolboy and later in college, was a doubtful and unknown quantity to him.

He had never known Grismer well. Since their schoolboy differences, they had been good enough friends when thrown together, which had been infrequently. He had no particular liking for Grismer, no dislike. Grismer had been a clever, adroit, amusing man in college, generally popular, yet with no intimacies, no close friends.

As for Steve, he never dreamed that Stephanie would do such a thing. It was so damnably silly, so utterly unthinkable a thing to do.

And in his angry perplexity and growing resentment, Cleland's conscience hurt as steadily as a toothache. He ought to have been home long ago. He should have gone back at the end of his two years. His father had trusted him to look out for Steve, and, in spite of her rather bumptious letters proclaiming her independence, he should have gone back and kept an eye on her, whether or not she liked it.

In his astonishment and unhappiness, he did not know what to write her when the cablegram came hurtling into his calm and delightfully ordered life and blew up the whole fabric.

Sometimes, to himself, he called her a "little fool"; sometimes "poor little Steve." But always he unfeignedly cursed Grismer and bitterly blamed himself.

The affair made him sick at heart and miserable, and ruined any pleasure remaining in his life and work.

He did not cable her; he wrote many letters and tore all of them to bits. It was beyond him to accept the *fait accompli*, beyond him to write even politely, let alone with any pretense of cordiality.

His resentment grew steadily, increased by self-reproach. What kind of man had Oswald Grismer grown into? What kind of insolence was this—his marrying Steve—

—
"Damn his yellow soul, I'll wring his neck!" muttered Cleland, pacing the deck of the Cunarder in the chilly April sunshine.

But the immense astonishment of it still possessed him. He couldn't imagine Steve married. *Why* had she married? What earthly reason was there? It was incredible, absurd.

Still in his mind lingered the image of the girl Stephanie whom he remembered as he last had seen her.

Once or twice, too, thinking of that time, and conjuring up all he could picture of her, he remembered the delicate ardour of her parting embrace, the fragrant warmth of her mouth, and her arms around his neck.

It angered him oddly to remember it—to think of her as the wife of Oswald Grismer. The idea seemed unendurable; it threw him into a rage against this man who had so suddenly taken Stephanie Quest out of his life.

"Damn him! Damn him!" he muttered, staring out over the wind-whipped sea. "I'd like to twist his neck! There's something queer about this. I'll take her away from him if I can. I'll do everything I can to take her away from him. I want her back. I'll get her back if it's possible. How can she care for Grismer?"

He had nobody, now, to return to; no home, for the house was closed; no welcome to expect.

He had not written her that he was coming; he had no desire to see her at the steamer with Grismer. With a youthful heart full of indefinable bitterness and self-contempt that his own indifference and selfishness had brought Steve and himself to such a pass, he paced the decks day after day, making no acquaintances, keeping to himself.

And one night the great light on Montauk Point stared at him across leagues of unseen water. He was in touch again with his own half of the earth, nearing the edges of the great, raw, sprawling Continent where no delicate haze of tradition softened sordid facts; where there reigned no calm and ordered philosophy of life; where everything was in extremes; where everything was etched sharply against aggressive backgrounds; where there were no misty middle distances, no tranquil spaces; only the roaring silences of deserts to mitigate the yelling dissonance of life.

He saw the sun on the gilded tips of snowy towers piled up like Alpine cliffs; the vast webs of bridges stretching athwart a leaden flood; forests of masts and huge painted funnels; acres of piers and docks; myriads of craft crossing and recrossing the silvery flood flowing between great cities.

On the red castle to the southwest a flag flew, sun-dyed, vivid, lovely as a flower. His eyes filled; he choked.

"Thank God," he thought, "I'm where I belong at last!"

And so Cleland came home.

CHAPTER XVII

It was late afternoon before Cleland got his luggage unpacked and himself settled in the Hotel Rochambeau, where he had been driven from the steamer and had taken rooms.

The French cuisine, the French proprietor and personnel, the French café in front, all helped to make his home-coming a little less lonely and strange. Sunlight fell on the quaint yellow brick façade and old-fashioned wrought iron railings, and made his musty rooms and tarnished furniture and hangings almost cheerful.

He had not telephoned to Stephanie. He had nothing to say to her over the wire. From the moment he crossed the gang-plank the growing resentment had turned to a curious, impotent sort of anger which excited him and stifled any other emotion.

She had not known that he was coming back. He had made no response to her cablegram. She could not dream that he had landed; that he was within a stone's throw of her lodgings.

The whole thing, too, seemed unreal to him—to find himself here in New York again amid its clamour, its dinginess, its sham architecture and crass ugliness!—back again in New York—and everything in his life so utterly changed!—no home—the 80th Street house still closed and wired and the old servants gone or dead; and the city empty of interest and lonely as a wilderness to him since his father's death—and now Steve gone! nothing, now, to hold him here—for the ties of friends and clubs had loosened during his years abroad, and his mind and spirit had become formed in other moulds.

Yet here he knew he must do his work if ever he was to do any. Here was the place for the native-born—here his workshop where he must use and fashion all that he had witnessed and learned of life during the golden hours through which he sauntered under the lovely skies of an older civilization.

Here was the place and now was the time for self-expression, for creative work, for the artistic interpretation of the life and manners of his own people.

If he was to do anything, be anybody, attain distinction, count among writers of his era, he knew that his effort lay here—here where he was born and lived his youth to manhood—here where the tension of feverish living never relaxed, where a young, high-mettled, high-strung nation was clamouring and fretting and quarrelling and forging ahead, now floundering aside after some will-o'-the-wisp, now scaling stupendous moral heights, noisy, half-educated, half-civilized, suspicious, flippant, bragging, sentimental, yet iron-hearted, generous and brave.

Here, on the nation's eastern edge, where the shattering dissonance of the iron city never ceased by day; where its vast, metallic vibration left the night eternally unquiet and the very sky quivering with the blows of sound under the stars' incessant sparkle—here, after all, was where he belonged. Here he must have his say. Here lay

his destiny. And, for the sake of all this which was his, and for no other reason, was attainment and distinction worth his effort.

All this good and evil, all this abominable turmoil and futile discord, all this relentless, untiring struggle deep in the dusty, twilight cañons and steel towers with their thin skins of stone—all the passions of these people, and their motives and their headlong strivings and their creeds and sentiments, false or true or misguided—these things were his to interpret, to understand, to employ.

For these people, and for their cities, for their ambitions, desires, aspirations—for the vast nation of which they formed their local fragment—only a native-born could be their interpreter, their eulogist, their defender, their apologist, and their prophet. And for their credit alone was there any reason for his life's endeavour.

No cultured, suave product of generations of Europe's cultivation could handle these people and these themes convincingly and with the subtle comprehension of authority. Rod and laurel, scalpel and palm should be touched only by the hand of the native-born.

His pretty Countess had said to him once:

"Only what you have seen, what you have lived and seen others live; only what you detect from the clear-minded, cool, emotionless analysis of your own people, is worth the telling. Only this carries conviction. And, when told with all the cunning simplicity and skill of an artist, it carries with it that authority which leaves an impression indelible! Go back to your own people—if you really have anything to write worth reading."

Thinking of these things, he locked his door on rooms now more or less in order, and went out into the street.

It was too warm for an overcoat. A primrose sunset light filled the street; the almost forgotten specific odour of New York invaded his memory again—an odour entirely different from that of any other city. For every city in the world has its own odour—not always a perfume.

Now, again, his heart was beating hard and fast at thought of seeing Stephanie, and the same indefinable anger possessed him—not directed entirely against anyone, but inclusive of himself, and her, and Grismer, and his own helplessness and isolation.

The street she lived in was quiet. There seemed to be a number of studios along the block. In a few minutes he saw the number he was looking for.

Four brick dwelling houses had been made over into one with studios on every floor—a rather pretty Colonial effect with green shutters, white doorway, and iron fence painted white.

In the quaint vestibule with its classic fanlight and delicate side-lights, he found her name on a letter box and pushed the electric button. The street door swung open noiselessly.

On the ground floor, facing him on the right, he saw a door on which was a copper plate bearing the names, "Miss Davis; Miss Quest." The door opened as he

touched the knocker; a young girl in stained sculptor's smock stood there regarding him inquiringly, a cigarette between her pretty, clay-stained fingers.

"Miss——" he checked himself, reddening—"Mrs. Grismer, I mean?" he asked.

The girl laughed. She was brown-eyed, pink-cheeked, compactly and beautifully moulded, and her poise and movement betrayed the elasticity of superb health.

"She's out just now. Will you come in and wait?"

He went in, aware of clay studies on revolving stands, academic studies in unframed canvases, charcoal drawings from the nude, thumb-tacked to the wall—the usual mess of dusty draperies, decrepit and nondescript furniture, soiled rugs and cherished objects of art. A cloying smell of plasticine pervaded the place. A large yellow cat, dozing on a sofa, opened one golden eye a little way, then closed it indifferently.

The girl who had admitted him indicated a chair and stepped before a revolving table on which was the roughly-modelled sketch of a horse and rider.

She picked up a lump of waxy material, and, kneading it in one hand, glanced absently at the sketch, then looked over her shoulder at Cleland with a friendly, enquiring air:

"Miss Quest went out to see about her costume. I suppose she'll be back shortly."

"What costume?" he asked.

"Oh, didn't you know? It's for the Caricaturists' Ball in aid of the Artists' Fund. It's the Ball of the Gods—the great event of the season and the last. Evidently you don't live in New York."

"I haven't, recently."

"I see. Will you have a cigarette?" She pointed at a box on a tea tray; he thanked her and lighted one. As he continued to remain standing, she asked him again to be seated, and he complied.

She continued to pinch off little lumps of waxy, pliable composition and stick them on the horse. Still fussing with the sketch, he saw a smile curve her cheek in profile; and presently she said without turning:

"Why did you speak of Stephanie Quest as Mrs. Grismer? *We* don't, you know."

"Why not? Isn't she?"

The girl looked at him over her shoulder; she was startlingly pretty, fresh and smooth-skinned as a child.

"Who *are* you?" she asked, with that same little hint of friendly curiosity in her brown eyes;—"I'm Helen Davis, Stephanie's chum. You seem to know a good deal about her."

"I'm James Cleland," he said quietly, "—her brother."

At that the girl's brown eyes flew wide open:

"Good Heavens!" she said; "did Steve expect you? She never said a word to me! I thought you were a fixture in Europe!"

He sat biting the end of his cigarette, not looking at her:

"She didn't expect me," he said, flinging the half-burned cigarette into the silver slop-dish of the tea service. "I didn't notify her that I was coming."

Helen Davis dropped one elbow on the modelling table, rested her rounded chin in her palm, and bent her eyes on Cleland. Smoke from the cigarette between her fingers mounted in a straight, thin band to the ceiling.

"So you are Steve's Jim," she mused aloud. "I recognize you now, from your photographs, only you're older and thinner—and you wear a moustache.... You've been away a long while, haven't you?"

"Too long," he said, casting a sombre look at her.

"Oh, do you feel that way? How odd it will seem to you to see Steve again. She's such a darling! Quite wonderful, Mr. Cleland. The artists' colony in New York raves over her."

"Does it?" he said drily.

"Everybody does. She's so amusing, so clever, so full of talent and animation—like a beautiful and mischievous thoroughbred on tip-toes with vitality and the sheer joy of living. She never is in low spirits or depressed. That's what fascinates everybody—her gaiety and energy and high spirits. I knew her in college and she wasn't quite that way then. Perhaps because she hated college. But she could be a perfect little devil if she wanted to. She can be that still."

Cleland nodded almost absently; his preoccupied gaze travelled over the disordered studio and concentrated scowlingly on the yellow cat. He kept twisting the head of his walking stick between his hands and staring at the animal in silence while Helen Davis watched him. Presently, and without any excuse, she walked slowly away and vanished into some inner room. When she returned, she had discarded her working smock, and her smooth hands were slightly rosy from a recent toilet.

"I'm going to give you some tea," she said, striking a match and lighting the lamp under the kettle at his elbow.

"Thanks, no," he said with an effort.

"Yes, you shall have some," she insisted, smiling in her gay little friendly way. "Come, Mr. Cleland, you are man of the world enough to waive formality. I'm going to sit here and make tea and talk to you. Look at me! Wouldn't you like to be friends with me? Most men would."

He looked up, and his slightly drawn features relaxed.

"Yes," he said with a smile, "of course I would."

"That's very human of you," she laughed. "Shall we talk about Steve? What *did* you think of that cablegram? Did you ever hear of such a crazy thing?"

He flushed with anger but said nothing. The girl looked at him intently over the steaming kettle, then went on measuring out tea.

"Shall I tell you about it, or would you rather that Steve told you?" she asked carelessly, busy with her preparations.

"She is actually married to—Grismer—then?"

"Well—I suppose so. You know him, of course."

"Yes."

"He *is* fascinating—in that unusual way of his—poor fellow. Women like him better than men do. One meets him everywhere in artistic circles; but do you know, Mr. Cleland, I've always seemed to be conscious of a curious sort of latent hostility to Oswald Grismer, even among people he frequents—among men, particularly. However, he has no intimates."

"If they are actually married," he said with an effort, "why does Stephanie live here with you?"

"Oh, that was the ridiculous understanding. I myself don't know why she married him. The whole affair was a crazy, feather-brained performance——" She poured his tea and offered him a sugar biscuit, which he declined.

"You see," she continued, curling up into the depths of her rickety velvet arm-chair and taking her cup and a heap of sugar biscuits into her lap, "Oswald Grismer has been Steve's shadow—at her heels always—and I know well enough that Stephanie was not insensible to the curious fascination of the man. You know how devotion impresses a girl—and he *is* clever and good looking.

"And that was all very well, and I don't think it would have amounted to anything serious as long as Oswald was the amusing, good-looking, lazy and rich amateur of sculpture, with plenty of leisure to saunter through life and be charmingly attentive, and play with his profession when the whim suited him."

She sipped her tea and looked at Cleland meditatively.

"Did you know he'd lost all his money?"

"No," said Cleland.

"Oh, yes. He lost it a year ago. He has scarcely anything, I believe. He had a beautiful studio and apartment, wonderful treasures of antique furniture; he had about everything a rich young man fancies. It all went."

"What was the matter?"

"Nobody knows. He took a horrid little stable studio in Bleecker Street, and he lives there. And *that's* why Steve did that crazy, impulsive thing, I suppose."

"You mean she was sorry for him?"

"I *think* it must have been that—and the general fascination he had for her—and his persistency and devotion. Really, I don't know, myself, how she came to do it. She did it on one of her ill-considered, generous, headlong impulses. Ask her. All she ever told me was that she had married Oswald and didn't know how it was going to turn out, but had decided to keep her own name for the present and continue to live with me."

"Do they see each other—much?" he asked.

"Oh, they encounter each other here and there as usual. He drops in here every day."

"Does she go—there?"

"I don't know," said the girl gravely.

He had set aside his tea, untasted. She, still curled up in her arm-chair, ate and drank with a delightfully healthy appetite.

"Would you prefer a highball?" she enquired. "I could fix you one."

"No, thank you." He rose and began to walk nervously about the studio.

Her perplexed, brown eyes followed him. It was clear that she could not make him out.

Natural chagrin at a clandestine marriage might account for his manner. Probably it was that, because Stephanie could not have meant anything more personal and serious to him, or he could not have remained away so long.

He stopped abruptly in his aimless promenade and turned to Helen:

"Am I in the way?" he asked.

"My dear Mr. Cleland," she said, "we are a perfectly informal community. If you were in the way I'd say so. Also, I have a bed-room where I can retire when Steve comes in. Or you and she can go into her room to talk things over." She lighted another cigarette, rose, strolled over to the wax horse, with a friendly smile at him.

"I was just making a sketch," she said. "I've a jolly commission—two bronze horses for the Hispano-Moresque Museum. The Cid is on one, Saladin on the other. I was just fussing with an idea when you rang."

He came and stood beside her, looking at the sketch.

"I've a fine, glass-roofed courtyard in the rear of the studio for my animal models—horses and dogs and any beast I require," she explained. "This sort of thing comes first, of course. I think I'll get Oswald to pose for the Cid."

She stood contemplating her sketch, the cigarette balanced between her fingers; then, of a sudden, she turned swiftly around to confront him.

"Mr. Cleland, it *is* a dreadful and foolish and irrational thing that Steve has done, and I know you are justly angry. But—she is a darling in spite of being a feather-head sometimes. You *will* forgive her, won't you?"

"Of course. After all, it is her business."

Helen sighed:

"You *are* angry. But please don't lose interest in her. She's so loyal to you. She adores you, Mr. Cleland——"

A key rattled in the lock; the door swung open; into the dusky studio stepped a slender figure, charmingly buoyant and graceful in the fading light.

"Helen, they're to send our costumes in an hour. They are the most fascinating things——"

Stephanie's voice ceased abruptly. There was a silence.

"Who is—*that*?" she asked unsteadily.

Helen turned and went quietly away toward her bed-room. Stephanie stood as though frozen, then reached forward and pressed the electric button with a gloved finger that trembled.

"Jim!" she whispered.

She stole forward, nearer, close to him, still incredulous, her grey eyes wide with excitement; then, with a little sobbing cry she threw both arms around his neck.

She had laughed and cried there in his arms; her lovely head and disordered hair witnessed the passionate ardour of her welcome to this man who now sat beside her in her bed-room, her hands clasped in his, and all her young soul's adoration in her splendid eyes.

"Oh," she whispered again and again, "—Oh, to have you back, Jim. That is too heavenly to believe. You dear, dear boy—so good looking—and a little older and graver——" She nestled close to him, laying her cheek against his.

She murmured:

"It seems too delicious to endure. You do love me, don't you, Jim? We haven't anybody else in the world except each other, you know. Isn't it good—good to have each other again! It's been like a dream, your absence. You gradually became unreal—a dear, beloved memory. Somehow, I didn't think you'd ever come back. Are you happy to be with me?"

"Happier than you know, Steve——" His voice trembled oddly and he drew her into his arms: "Good God," he said under his breath, "—I must have been mad to leave you to your own devices so long! I ought to be shot!"

"What do you mean, Jim?"

"You know. Oh, Steve, Steve, I can't understand—I simply can not understand."

After a silence she lifted her head and rested her lips softly against his cheek.

"Do you mean—my marrying Oswald?" she asked.

"Yes. Why did you do such a thing?"

She bent her head, considering the question for a while in silence. Then she said calmly:

"There's one reason why I did it that I can't tell you. I promised him not to. Another reason was that he was very much in love with me. I don't know exactly what it is that I feel for him—but he does fascinate me. He always did, somehow. Even as a boy——"

"You didn't know him as a boy!"

"No. But I saw him once. And I realize now that I was even then vaguely conscious of an odd interest in him. And that time at Cambridge, too. He had that same, indefinable attraction for me——"

"You *are* in love with him then!"

"I don't know. Jim, I don't think it is love. I don't think I know what love really is. So, knowing this, but being grateful to him, and deeply sorry——"

"Why?"

"I can't tell you why. Perhaps I'll tell you sometime. But I was very grateful and sorry and—and more or less moved—fascinated. It's funny; there are things I don't

like about Oswald, and still I can't keep away from him.... Well, so everything seemed to combine to make me try it——"

"Try what?"

"Marrying him."

"What do you mean by 'trying it?'"

"Why, it's a trial marriage——"

"Good God!" he said. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it's a trial marriage," she repeated coolly.

"You mean there was no—no ceremony?" he stammered.

"There wasn't any ceremony. We don't believe in it. We just said to each other that we'd marry——"

"You mean you've—you've *lived* with that man on such terms of understanding?" he demanded, white with rage.

"I don't live with him. I live here with Helen," she said, perplexed. "All I would consent to was a trial marriage to see how it went for a year or two——"

"Do you mean that what you've done is legal?"

"Oh, yes, it's legal," she said seriously. "I've found that out."

"And—you know wh-what I mean," he said, stammering in his anger; "Was that sufficient for you? Do you want me to speak plainer, Steve? I mean, have you—lived with him?"

She understood and dropped her reddening cheek on his shoulder.

"*Have* you?" he repeated harshly.

"No.... I thought you understood. It is only a trial marriage; I've tried to explain that—make it clear——"

"What loose-minded, unconventional Bohemians call a 'trial marriage,'" he said, with brutal directness, "is an agreement between a pair of fools to live as man and wife for a while with an understanding that a formal ceremony shall ultimately confirm the irregularity if they find themselves suited to each other. Is that what you've done?"

"No."

He drew a deep, trembling breath of relief, took her in his arms and held her close.

"My little Steve," he whispered, "—my own little Steve! What sort of trap is this he's led you into?"

"No trap. I *wanted* to try it."

"You *wished* it?"

"I was quite willing to try. After a year or two, I'll know whether I shall ever care to live with him."

"After a year or two!"

"Yes. That was the understanding. And then, if I didn't wish to live with him, we can be very quietly divorced. It *was* a crazy thing to do. But there wasn't any real risk. Besides——" She hesitated.

"Go on," he said.

"No, I can't. If I don't fall in love with him, I certainly shall never live with him. So," she added calmly, "there'll be no children to complicate the parting. You see I had some sense, Jim."

She lifted her head from his shoulder and smiled at him:

"It was just an escapade of sorts," she explained, more cheerfully. "It really doesn't mean anything yet, and I fly around and have a wonderful time, and maybe I'll take up sculpture with Helen, and maybe I'll try the stage. Anyway——" she pressed closer to him with a happy sigh, "I've got *you* back, haven't I? So what do we care whether I'm his wife or not?"

He said, holding her closely embraced:

"Suppose some other man should fall in love with you, Steve?"

"Oh!" she laughed. "Plenty do. Or say they do. I'm nice to them, and they get along very well.... Your moustache is becoming to you, Jim." She touched it curiously, with one tentative finger.

"But suppose *you* should return another man's love some day?"

"I haven't ever!" she said, laughing back into his eyes.

"No, but suppose you did? And found yourself tied legally by a fool agreement to Oswald Grismer?"

"Oh. I never considered that."

"Consider it, now!"

"It isn't likely to happen——"

"Consider it, all the same."

"Well—but I've never been in love. But if it happened—well—that *would* be a jolly mess, wouldn't it?"

"I should think so! What would you do about it?"

"There wouldn't be anything to do except to wait until my two years of trial marriage was up," she said thoughtfully.

"You could divorce him before that."

"Oh, no. I promised to give him two years."

"To sit saddled with this ridiculous burden for two years?"

"Yes, I promised."

"Oh, Steve! Steve! What a muddle you have made of things! What good does it do you or him to have this chain between you? You've lost your liberty. You're a legal wife without being one. You've put shackles on yourself for God knows what whim or caprice."

"But, Jim," she said, bewildered, "I *expect* to be his wife, ultimately."

"What?"

"Of course. I wasn't absolutely sure that I could fall in love with him, that was all. I have very little doubt that I shall. I like to be with him: I am never bored when he is with me; our tastes are similar; our beliefs are unconventional. We suit each other admirably. It wasn't such a rash thing to do. You see, it is perfectly safe every way."

For a long while he sat beside her in silence. She had slipped out of his arms and now sat with one hand lying across his, watching the enigmatic expressions which flitted over his rather sombre and flushed features.

Finally he looked up:

"Steve?"

"Yes?"

"Suppose *I* fell in love with—you?"

"Oh, Jim!" She began to laugh, then the mirth faded in her grey eyes, and her lips grew quiet and rather grave.

"*You*?" she said, half to herself.

"Do you remember some letters I once wrote you?"

"Yes."

"You wrote asking if I meant them to be love letters."

"Yes. You answered very vaguely. I think I frightened you," she said, laughing.

"They *were* love letters," he said. "I didn't happen to know it; that is all. I *was* in love with you then. I didn't realize it; you did not believe it. But now I know it was so."

"How *could* you have been in love with me?" she inquired, astonished.

"You asked me that in your letters. I thought it over and I didn't see how I could be, either. I wasn't much more than a boy. Boys drift with the prevailing tide. The tide set away from home and from you.... Yet, I was in love with you once, Steve."

She bent her head and looked down gravely at her slender hand, which lay across his.

"That was very dear of you," she murmured.

After a silence:

"And—you?" he asked.

"Do you mean, was I ever in love with you?"

"Yes."

"I—don't—know. I loved your letters. There didn't seem to be any room in my heart for more affection than it held for you. I adored you. I do now. Perhaps, if you had come back——"

"I wish I had!"

"Do you?" She lifted her eyes to him curiously. "You know, Jim, I must be honest with you. I never did love anybody.... But, if you had come home—and if you had told me that you cared for me—that way——"

"Yes."

"Well, I was just a girl. You had my affections. I could have been taught very easily, I think—to care—differently——"

"And—now?"

"What?"

"Is it too late to teach you, Steve?"

"Why, yes. Isn't it?"

"Why?"

"I'm married."

"It's a flimsy, miserable business!" he began angrily, but she flushed and checked him with a hand against his lips.

"Besides—I do care for Oswald—very deeply," she said. "Don't say painful things to me.... Don't be sulky, Jim, dear. This is disconcerting me dreadfully. We mustn't make anything tragic out of it—anything unhappy. I'm so contented to have you back that I can't think of anything else.... Don't let's bother about love or anything else! What you and I feel for each other is more wonderful than love. Isn't it? Oh, Jim, I *do* adore you. We'll be with each other now a lot, won't we? You'll take a studio in this district, and I'll fly in at all hours to see you, and you'll come in to see me and we'll do things together—everything—theatres, dances, pictures, everything! And you will like Oswald, won't you? He's really so nice, poor boy!"

"All right," he muttered.

They rose; he took both her hands into his and looked intently into her grey eyes:

"I won't spoil life for you," he said. "I'll be near you, now. The old intimacy must be strengthened. I've failed wretchedly in my responsibilities; I'll try to make up for my selfishness——"

"Oh, Jim! I don't think that way——"

"You are too generous. You are too loyal. You are quite the most charming woman I ever knew, Steve—the sweetest, the most adorable. I've been a fool—blind and stupid."

"You mustn't say such ridiculous things! But it is dear of you to find me attractive! It really thrills me, Jim. I'm about the happiest girl in New York, I think! Tell me, do you like Helen?"

"Yes, she's nice. Where are you dining, Steve? Could you——"

"Oh, dear! Helen and I are dining out! It's a party. We all go to the ball. But, Jim—do get a costume of some sort and come to the Caricaturists' Ball! Will you? Helen and I are going. It's the Ball of the Gods—the last costume ball of the season, and it is sure to be amusing. Will you come?"

He didn't seem to think he could, but she insisted so eagerly and promised to have an invitation at his hotel for him by nine o'clock, that he laughed and said he'd go.

"Everybody artistic will be there," she explained, delighted. "You'll meet a lot of men you know. And the pageant will be wonderful. I shall be in it. So will Helen."

Then, after the pageant, we'll find each other—you and I!——" She sighed: "I am too happy, Jim. I don't want to arouse the anger of the gods."

She linked her arm in his and entered the studio.

"Helen!" she called. "Jim is coming to the dance! Isn't it delightful?"

"It is, indeed," said Helen, opening her door a little and looking through the crack. "You'd better tell him what you're wearing, because he will never know you."

"Oh, yes, indeed! Helen and I are going as a pair of Burmese idols—just gold all over—you know——?"

She took the stiff attitude of the wonderful Burmese idol, and threw back her slender hands—"This sort of thing, Jim? Tiny gold bells on our ankles and that wonderful golden filigree head dress."

She was in wonderful spirits; she caught his arm and hand and persuaded him into a two-step, humming the air. "You dance nicely, Jim. You can have me whenever you like——"

Helen called through the door:

"You're quite mad, Steve! You've scarcely time to dress."

"Oh, I must run!" she cried, turned to Cleland, audaciously, offered her lips, almost defiantly.

"We're quite safe, Jim, if we can do *this* so innocently." She laughed. "You adorable boy! Oh, Jim, you're mine now, and I'll never let you go away again!"

As he went out, he met Grismer, face to face. The blood leaped hotly in his cheeks; Grismer's golden eyes opened in astonishment:

"Cleland! By all the gods!" he said, offering his hand.

Cleland took it, looked into Grismer's handsome face:

"How are you, Grismer?" he said pleasantly. And passed on out of the front door.

CHAPTER XVIII

Cleland dined by himself in the lively, crowded café of the Hotel Rochambeau—a sombre, taciturn young man, still upset by his encounter with Grismer, still brooding impotent resentment against what Stephanie had done. Yet, in spite of this the thrill of seeing her again persisted, filling him with subdued excitement.

He realized that the pretty, engaging college girl he had left three years ago had developed into an amazingly lovely being with a delicately vigorous and decisive beauty of her own, quite unexpected by him. But there was absolutely no shyness, no awkwardness, no self-consciousness in her undisguised affection for him; the years had neither altered nor subdued her innocent acceptance of their relationship, nor made her less frank, less confident, or less certain of it and of the happy security it meant for both.

In spite of her twenty-one years, her education, her hospital experience, Stephanie, in this regard, was a little girl still. For her the glamour of the school-boy had never departed from Cleland with the advent of his manhood. He was still, to her, the wonderful and desirable playmate, the miraculous new brother, the exalted youth of her girlhood; the beloved and ideal of their long separation—all she had on earth that represented a substitute for kin and family ties and home. That her loyal heart was still the tender, impulsive, youthful heart of a girl was plain enough to him. The frankness of her ardour, her instant happy surrender, her clinging to him in a passion of gratitude and delight, all told him her story. But it made what she had done with Grismer the more maddening and inexplicable; and at every thought of it a gust of jealousy swept him.

He ate his dinner scarcely conscious of the jolly tumult around him, and presently went upstairs to his rooms to rummage in one of his trunks for a costume;—souvenir of some ancient Latin Quarter revelry—Closerie des Lilas or Quat'z Arts, perhaps.

Under his door had been thrust an envelope containing a card bearing his invitation, and Stephanie had written on it: "It will all be spoiled if you are not there. Don't forget that you'll have to dress as a god of sorts. All other costumes are barred."

What he had would do excellently. His costume of a blessed companion of Mahomet in white, green and silver, with its jeweled scimitar, its close-fitted body dress, gorget, and light silver head-piece, represented acceptably the ideal garb of the Lion of God militant.

Toward eleven o'clock, regarding himself rather gloomily in the mirror, the reflected image of an exceedingly good-looking Fourth Caliph, with the faint line of a mustache darkening his short upper lip and the green gems of a true believer glittering on casque and girdle and hilt, cheered the young man considerably.

"If I'm not a god," he thought, "I'm henchman to one." And he twisted the pale green turban around his helmet and sent for a taxicab.

The streets around the Garden were jammed. Mounted and foot-police laboured to keep back the curious crowds and to direct the crush of arriving vehicles laden with fantastic figures in silks and jewels. Arcades, portico, and the broad lobby leading to the amphitheatre were thronged with animated merrymakers in brilliant costumes; and Cleland received his cab-call number from the uniformed starter and joined the glittering stream which carried him resistlessly with it through the gates and presently landed him somewhere in a seat, set amid a solidly packed tier of gaily-costumed people.

An immense sound of chatter and laughter filled the vast place, scarcely subdued by the magic of a huge massed orchestra.

The Garden had been set to represent Mount Olympus; white pigeons were flying everywhere amid flowers and foliage; the backdrop was painted like a blue horizon full of rosy clouds, and the two entrances were divided by a marble-edged pool in which white swans sailed unconcerned and big scarlet gold-fish swam in the limpid water among floating blossoms.

But he had little time to gaze about through the lilac-haze of tobacco smoke hanging like an Ægean mist across the dancing floor, for already boy trumpeters, in white tunics and crowned with roses, were sounding the flourish and were dragging back the iris-hued hangings at either entrance.

The opening pageant had begun.

From the right entrance came the Greek gods and heroes—Zeus aloft in a chariot, shaking his brazen thunder bolts; Athene in helmet and tunic, clutching a stuffed owl; Astarte very obvious, long-legged and pretty; Mars with drawn sword and fiery copper armour; Hermes wearing wings on temples and ankles and skilfully juggling the caduceus, Aphrodite most casually garbed in gauze, perfectly fashioned by her Maker and rather too visible in lovely detail.

Eros, very feminine too, lacked sartorial protection except for a pair of wings and a merciful sash from which hung quiver and bow. In fact, it was becoming startlingly apparent that the artists responsible for the Ball of All the Gods scorned to conceal or mitigate the classical and accepted legends concerning them and their costumes—or lack of costumes.

Fauns, dryads, nymphs, satyrs, naiads, bacchantes poured out from the right entrance, eddying in snowy whirlpools around the chariots of the Grecian gods; and the influence of the Russian ballet was visible in every lithely leaping figure.

Contemporaneously, from the left entrance, emerged the old Norse gods: Odin, shaggy and fully armed; Loki, all a-glitter with dancing flames; Baldin the Beautiful, smirking; Fenris the Wolf; Frija, blond and fiercely beautiful—the entire Norse galaxy surrounded by skin-clad warriors and their blond, half-naked mates.

The two processions, moving in parallel lines along the north and south tiers of boxes, were overlapping and passing each other now, led in a winding march by trumpeters; and all the while, from either entrance new bevies of gods and immortals

were emerging—the deities of Ancient Egypt moving stiffly in their splendid panoply; the gods of the ancient Western World led by the Holder of Heaven and Hiawatha, and followed by the Eight Thunders plumed in white escorting the Lake Serpent—a young girl, lithe and sinuous as a snake and glittering from head to foot, with the serpent spot on her forehead.

Ancient China, in bewildering silks, entered like a moving garden of flowers; then India came in gemmed magnificence led by the divine son of Suddhodana.

He bore the bow of black steel with gold tendrils—the Bow of Sinhahânu. He was dressed as the Prince Siddhartha, in the garb of a warrior of Oudh. Bow and sabre betrayed the period—the epoch of his trial against all comers to win the Sâkya girl Yasôdhara.

As he passed, Cleland, leaning forward, scanned the splendid and militant figure intently; and recognized Oswald Grismer under the glimmering dress of the young Buddha militant.

To left and right of the youthful god advanced two girls, all in relieved stiff gold from the soles of their up-turned sandals to the fantastic pagoda peak of their head-dresses.

They wore golden Burmese masks; their bodies to the girdles were covered with open-work golden filigree; from the fantastic pagoda-like shoulder-pieces gold gauze swept away like the folded golden wings of dragon-flies; golden bangles and bells tinkled on wrist and ankle.

With slim hands uplifted like the gilded idols they represented, the open eye painted in the middle of each palm became visible. Around them swirled a dazzling throng of Nautch girls.

Suddenly they flung up their arms: the stiff gold masks and body-encasements cracked like gilded mummy cases and fell down clashing around their naked feet, and from the cold, glittering chrysalids stepped out two warm, living, enchantingly youthful figures, lithe and supple, saluting the Prince Siddhartha with bare arms crossed above their breasts.

To one, representing his mother, Maya, he turned, laying the emblems of temporal power at her feet. And, in her, Cleland recognized Helen Davis.

But his eyes were for the other—the Sâkya girl Yasôdhara in gold sari and chuddah, her body clasped with a belt of emeralds and a girdle of the same gems tied below her breasts.

The young Lord Buddha laid the living Rose of the World in her hands. She bent her head and drew it through her breast-girdle. Then, silk-soft, exquisite, the Sâkya maid lifted her satin-lidded eyes, sweeping the massed audience above as though seeking some one. And Cleland saw that her eyes were lilac-grey; and that the girl was Stephanie.

Suddenly the massed orchestras burst into an anachronistic two-step. The illusion was shattered; the ball was on! Assistants ran up and gathered together the glittering

débris and pushed chariot, papier maché elephant and camel and palanquin through the two entrances; god seized goddess, heroes nabbed nymphs; all Olympus and the outlying suburban heavens began to foot it madly to the magic summons of George Cohan.

Under the blaze of lights the throng on the dancing floor swirled into glittering whirlpools and ripples, brilliant as sunset on a restless sea. The gaily costumed audience, too, was rising everywhere and leaving seats and stalls and boxes to join the dancing multitudes below.

Before he descended, Cleland saw Grismer and Stephanie dancing together, the girl looking up over her shoulder as though still searching the tiers of seats above for somebody expected.

Before he reached the floor he began to meet old friends and acquaintances, more or less recognizable under strange head-dresses and in stranger raiment.

He ran into Badger Spink, as a fawn in the spotted skin of a pard, his thick hair on end and two little horns projecting.

"Hello," he said briefly; "you back? Glad to see you—excuse me, but I'm chasing a little devil of a dryad——"

He caught sight of her as he spoke; the girl shrieked and fled and after her galloped the fawn, intent on capture.

Clarence Verne, colourless of skin in his sombrely magnificent Egyptian dress, extended an Egyptian hand to him—the hand he remembered so well, with its deep, pictographic cleft between forefinger and thumb.

"When did *you* come back, Cleland?" he inquired in that listless, drugged voice of his. "To-day? Hope we'll see something of you now.... Do you know that Nautch girl—the one in orange and silver? She's Claudia Gwynn, the actress. She hasn't got much on, has she? Can the Ball des Quat'z beat this for an unconcerned revelation of form divine?"

"I don't think it can," said Cleland, looking at a bacchante whose raiment seemed to be voluminous enough. The only trouble was that it was also transparent.

"Nobody cares any more," remarked Verne in his drowsy voice. "The restless sex has had its way. It always has been mad to shed its clothes in public. First it danced barefooted, then it capered barelegged. Loie, Isadora and Ruth St. Denis between 'em started the fashion; Bakst went 'em one better; then society tore off its shoulder-straps and shortened its petticoats; and the Australian swimming Venus stripped for the screen. It's all right; I don't care. Only it's a bore to have one's imagination become atrophied from disuse.... If I can find a girl thoroughly covered I'd be interested."

He sauntered away to search, and Cleland edged around the shore of the dancing floor, where the flotsam from the glittering maelstrom in the centre had been cast up.

Threading his way amid god and goddess, nymph and hero, he met and recognized Philip Grayson, one of his youthful masters at school—a tall, handsome figure in Greek armour.

"This is nice, Cleland," he said cordially. "Didn't know you were back. Quite a number of your old school fellows here!"

"Who?"

"Oswald Grismer——"

"I saw him."

"Did you run across Harry Belter?"

"No," exclaimed Cleland, "is he here?"

"Very much so. Harry is always in the thick of things artistic. How goes literature with you?"

"I came back to start things," said Cleland. "How does it pan out with you?"

"Well," said Grayson, "I write things that are taken by what people call the 'better class' magazines. It doesn't seem to advance me much."

"Cheer up. Try a human magazine and become a best seller," said Cleland, laughing.

And he continued his search for Stephanie.

There was a crush on the floor—too many dancing in the beginning—and all he could do was to prowl along the side lines. In a lower-tier box he noticed a fat youth, easily recognizable as Bacchus. His wreath of wax grapes he wore rakishly over one eye; he sat at a table with several thirsty dryads and bestowed impartial caresses and champagne. Occasionally he burst into throaty song in praise of the grape.

"Harry Belter!" cried Cleland.

"Hey! Who?" demanded Bacchus, leaning over the edge of the box, his glass suspended. "No! It isn't Jim Cleland! I won't believe it! It's only a yearned-for vision come to plague and torment me in my old age——!" He got up, leaned over and seized Cleland by his silken sabre-belt:

"Jim! It *is* you! To my arms, old scout——!" embracing him vociferously. "Welcome, dear argonaut! Ladies! Prepare to blush and tremble with pleasurable emotion!" he cried, turning to his attendant dryads. "This is my alter ego, James Cleland—my beloved comrade in villainy—my incomparable breaker of feminine hearts! You all shall adore him. You shall dote upon him. Ready! Attention! Dote!"

"I'm doting like mad," said a bright-eyed dryad, looking down invitingly at the handsome young fellow. "Only if he's a Turk I simply won't stand for a harem!"

"In the Prophet's Paradise," said Cleland, laughing, "there's no marriage or giving in marriage. Will you take a chance, pretty dryad? All the girls are on an equal footing in the Paradise of Mahomet, and we Caliphs just saunter from houri to houri and tell each that she's the only one!"

"Saunter this way, please," cried another youthful dryad, adjusting the wreath of water-lilies so that she could more effectively use her big dark eyes on him.

Belter whispered:

"They're from the new show—'Can You Beat It!'—just opened to record business. Better pick one while the picking's good. Come on up!"

But Cleland merely lingered to pay his compliments a few moments longer, then, declining to enter the box and join Belter in vocal praise of the grape, and eluding that gentleman's fond clutch, he dodged and slipped away to continue his quest of the silken, slender Sâkya girl somewhere engulfed amid all this glitter, surging, beating noisily around him.

Frequently, as he made his devious way forward, men and women of the more fashionable and philistine world recognized and greeted him; he was constantly stopping to speak to acquaintances of what used to be the saner sets, renew half-forgotten friendships, exchange lively compliments and gay civilities.

But he failed to detect any vast and radical difference between the world and the three-quarter world. The area in square inches of bare skin displayed by a young matron of his own sort matched the satin nakedness of some animated ornament from the Follies.

As he stood surveying the gorgeous throng he seemed to be subtly aware of a tension, an occult strain keying to the breaking point each eager, laughing woman he looked at. The scented atmosphere was heavy with it; the rushing outpour of the violins was charged with it; it was something more than temporary excitement, more than the reckless gaiety of the moment; it was something that had become part of these women—a vast, deep-bitten restlessness possessing them soul and body.

The aspiring quest for the hitherto unattainable, the headlong hunt for happiness, these were human and definite and to be comprehended: but this immense, aimless, objectless restlessness, mental or spiritual, whichever it might be, seemed totally different.

It was like a blind, crab-like, purposeless, sidling migration in mass of the prehistoric female race—before it had created the male for its convenience—wandering out into and over-running the primeval wastes of the world, swarming, crawling at random—not conscious of what it desired, not knowing what it might be seeking, aware only of the imperative urge within it which set it in universal motion. Only to weary, after a few million years of subdivision and self-fertilization, and casually extemporize the sterner sex. And settle again into primeval lethargy and the somnolent inertia of automatic reproduction.

Watching the golden human butterflies whirling around him swept into eddies by thunderous gusts of music, he thought, involuntarily of those filmy winged creatures that dance madly in millions and millions over northern rivers and are swept in sparkling clouds amid the rainbow spray of cataracts out into the evening splendour of annihilation.

He met a pretty woman he knew—had thought that he had known once—and reddened slightly at the audacity of her Grecian raiment. Her husband—a Harvard man he had known—was with her, in eye-glasses and a Grecian helmet—Ajax the Greater, he explained.

They lingered to exchange a word; she beat time to the music with sandalled foot, a feverish brilliancy in eyes and cheeks.

"The whole world," said Cleland, "seems strung too tightly. I noticed it abroad, too. There's a tension that's bound to break; the skies of the whole earth are full of lightning. Something is going to blow up."

"Hope it won't be the stock market," said the man. "I don't get you, Cleland—you always were literary."

"He means war," said his wife, restlessly fanning her flushed cheeks. "Or suffrage. Which *do* you mean, Mr. Cleland?"

"You've got all you want—practically—haven't you?" he asked.

"Practically. It's a matter of a year or so—the vote."

"What will you do next?" he inquired, smiling.

"Heaven knows, but we've simply got to keep doing something," she said. "What a ghastly bore to attain everything! If you men really love us, for goodness' sake keep on tyrannizing over us and giving us something to fight for!"

She laughed and blew him a kiss as her husband encircled her Grecian waist and steered her out into the fox-trotting throng, her flimsy draperies fluttering like the wind-blown tunic of a Tanagra dancing figure.

The stamp and jingling din of Nautch girls rang in his ears as he turned away and looked out over the shifting crowd.

Everywhere he recognized people he had met or heard about, men eminent or notorious in their vocations, actors, painters, writers, architects, musicians—men of science, lawyers, promoters, officers of industry commissioned and non-commissioned, the gayer element of the stage were radiantly in evidence, usually in the dancing embrace of Broad and Wall Streets; artistic masculine worth and youth pranced proudly with femininity of social attainment; the beautiful unplaced were there in daring deshabille, captivating solid domestic character which had come there wifeless and receptive.

Suddenly he saw Stephanie. She was leaning back against the side of the arena, besieged by a ring of men. Gales of laughter swept her brilliant entourage of gods and demons, fauns and heroes, all crowding about to pay their eager court. And Stephanie, laughing back at them from the centre of the three-fold circle, her arms crossed behind her, stood leaning against the side of the amphitheatre under a steady rain of rose petals dropped on her by some young fellows in the box above her.

Through this rosy rain, through the three-fold ring of glittering gods, she caught sight of Cleland—met his gaze with a soft, quick cry of delight.

Out through the circle of chagrined Olympians she sprang on sandalled feet, not noticing these protesting suitors; and with both lovely, rounded arms outstretched, her jewelled hands fell into Cleland's, clasping them tightly in an ecstasy of possession.

"I couldn't find you," she explained breathlessly. "I was so dreadfully afraid you hadn't come! Isn't it all magnificent! Isn't it wonderful! Did you see the pageant? Did

you ever see anything as splendid? Slip your arm around me; we can walk better together in this crush——" passing her own bare arm confidently over his shoulder and falling into step with him.

"I saw you in the pageant," he said, encircling with his arm the silken body-vestment of her slender waist.

"Did you? Did you see Helen and me come out of our golden chrysalids? Was it pretty?"

"Charming and unexpected. You are quite the most beautiful thing on the floor to-night."

"Really, Jim, do you think so? You darling boy, to say it! I'm having a wonderful time. How handsome you are in your dress of a young oriental warrior!"

"I'm the fourth Caliph, Ali," he explained. "I had this costume made in Paris."

"It's bewitching, Jim. You *are* good looking!—you adorable brother of mine. Do you like my paste emeralds? You don't think I'm too scantily clad, do you?"

"That seems to be the general fashion——"

"Oh, Jim! There are lots of others *much* more undressed. Besides, one simply has to be historical and accurate or one is taken for an ignoramus. If I'm to impersonate the Sākya girl, Yassôdhara, before she became Lord Buddha's wife, I must wear what she probably wore. Don't you see?"

"Perfectly," he said, laughing. "But you of the artistic and unconventional guilds ought to leave the audacious costumes to your models. But, of course, that's too much to ask of you."

"Indeed it is!" she said gaily. "If some of us think we're rather nicely made why shouldn't we dare a little artistically—in the name of beauty and of art? ... Oh, Jim!—it's the tango they're beginning. *Will* you!—with *me*?"

They danced the exquisitely graceful measure together, her little golden-sandalled feet flashing noiselessly through the intricate steps, lingering, swaying, gliding faultlessly in unison with his as though part of his own body.

The fascinating rhythm of the Argentine music throbbed through the perfumed air; a bright, whispering wilderness of silk and jewels swayed rustling all around them; bare arms and shoulders, brilliant lips and eyes floated through their line of dreary vision; figures like phantoms passed in an endless rosy chain through the lustrous haze of motion.

They danced together whatever came; Stephanie, like a child fearful of being abandoned, kept one slim jewelled hand fast hold of his sleeve or girdle when they were not dancing. To one and all who came to argue or present fancied prior claims she turned a deaf ear and laughing lips, listening to no pleading, no claims.

She threatened Harry Belter with the flat of her palm, warning him indignantly when he attempted a two-step, by violence; she closed her ears to Badger Spink, who danced with rage in his goat-skins; she waved away Verne in all his Egyptian splendour; she let her grey eyes rest in an insolent stare at two of Belter's dryads who

encircled Cleland's waist with avowed intent to make him their prisoner and dedicate him to vocal praise of the vine.

Then there was a faint clash and flash of iridescence, and the Prince Siddhartha confronted her, golden-eyed, golden-skinned, golden-haired, magnificent in his golden vestments.

"Oswald!" she cried. "Oh, I am glad. Jim! You and Oswald will be friends, won't you? You're such dears—you simply must like each other!"

They shook hands, looking with curious intentness at each other.

"I've always liked you, Cleland," said Grismer gracefully. "I don't think you ever cared for me very much, but I wish you might."

"I have found you—agreeable, Grismer. We were friendly at school and college together——"

"I hope our friendliness may continue."

"I—hope so."

Grismer smiled:

"Drop in whenever you care to, Cleland, and talk things over. We've a lot to say to each other, I think."

"Thanks." ... He looked hard at Grismer. "All right; I'll do it."

Grismer nodded:

"I've a kennel of sorts in Bleecker Street. But you might be interested in one or two things I'm working on. You see," he added with careless good humour, "I'm obliged to work, now."

Cleland said in a low voice:

"I'm sorry things went wrong with you."

"Oh, they didn't. It was quite all right, Cleland. I really don't mind. Will you really drop in some day soon?"

"Yes."

Dancing began again. Grismer stepped back with the easy, graceful courtesy that became him, conceding Stephanie to Cleland as a matter of course; and the latter, who had been ready to claim her, found himself disarmed in advance.

"Is it Grismer's dance, Steve?" he asked.

"I promised him. But, Jim, I'm afraid to let you go——"

They all laughed, and she added:

"When a girl gets a man back after three long years, is it astonishing that she keeps tight hold of him?"

"You'd better dance with her, Cleland," said Grismer, smiling.

But Cleland could not accept a gift from this man, and he surrendered her with sufficient grace.

"Jim!" she said frankly. "You're not going after that dryad, are you? She's exceedingly common and quite shamelessly under-dressed. Shall I introduce you to a nice girl—or do you know a sufficient number?"

"You know," he said, laughing, "that I ought to play my part of Fourth Caliph and go and capture a pretty widow——"

"What!"

"Certainly," he said tranquilly; "didn't Ali take prisoner Ayesha, the youthful widow of Mohammed? I'll look about while you're dancing——"

"I don't wish you to!" she exclaimed, half vexed, half laughing. "Oswald, does he mean it?"

"He looks as though he does," replied Grismer, amused. "There's a Goddess of Night over there, Cleland—very pretty and very unconcealed under a cloud of spangled stars——"

"Oswald! I don't wish him to! Jim! Listen to me, please——!" for he had already started toward the little brunette Goddess of Night. "We have box seven! Please remember. I shall wait for you!"

"Right!" he nodded, now intently bent on displeasing her; a little excited, too, by her solicitude, yet sullenly understanding that it sprang from no deeper emotion than her youthful heart had yet betrayed for him. No woman ever let a man go willingly, whether kin or lover—whether she had use for him or not.

Stephanie, managing to keep him in view among the dancers, saw the little Goddess of Night, with her impudent up-tilted nose, floating amid her scandalously diaphanous draperies in his arms through a dreamy tango, farther and farther away from her.

Things went wrong with her, too; she dropped her emerald girdle and several of the paste stones rolled away; the silk of her body-vest ripped, revealing the snowy skin, and she had to knot her gold sari higher. Then the jewelled thong of her left sandal snapped and she lost it for a moment.

"The devil!" she said, slipping her bare foot into it and half skating toward the nearest lower-tier box.

"There he is over there," remarked Grismer, indicating a regulation Mephistopheles, wearing a blood-red jerkin laced with a wealth of superfluous points. "Wait; I'll borrow a lace of him."

The devil was polite and had no objection to being despoiled; and Grismer came back with a chamois thong and mended her sandal for her while she sat in their box and watched the tumult surging below.

He chatted gaily with her for a while, leaning there on the box's edge beside her, but Stephanie had become smilingly inattentive and preoccupied, and he watched her in silence, now, curiously, a little perplexed by her preoccupation. For it was most unusual for her to betray inattention when with him. It was not like her. He could not remember her ever being visibly uninterested in him—ever displaying preoccupation or indifference when in his company.

However, the excitement of seeing her brother again so unexpectedly accounted for it no doubt.

The excitement and pleasure of seeing her—*brother!* ... A slight consciousness of the fact that there was no actual kinship between this girl and Cleland passed through his mind without disturbing his tranquillity. He merely happened to think of it.... He happened to recollect it; that was all.

"Stephanie?"

"Yes."

"Shall we sit out this dance? Your sandal string will hold."

"I don't know," she said. "Who is that dancing with Helen? Over there to the left——"

"I see her. I don't know—oh, yes—it's Phil Grayson."

"Is it? I wonder where Jim went with that woman! ... I'm horribly thirsty, Oswald."

"Shall we have some supper?"

"Where is it? Oh, down there! What a stuffy place! It's too awful. Couldn't you get something here?"

He managed to bribe one perspiring and distracted waiter, and after a long while he brought a tray towering with salads, ices and bottles.

Helen and Philip Grayson came back and the former immediately revealed a healthy appetite.

"Don't you want anything to eat, Steve?" she inquired. "This shrimp salad isn't bad."

"I'm not hungry."

"You seem to be thirsty," remarked Helen, looking at the girl's flushed face and her half-filled wine glass. "Where is Jim?"

"Dancing."

"With whom?"

"Some girl of sorts whom he picked up," said Stephanie; and the pink flush in her face deepened angrily.

"Was she worth it?" inquired Helen, frankly amused.

Stephanie's cheeks cooled; she replied carelessly:

"She had button eyes and a snub nose and her attire was transparent—if that interests you." She rested her elbow on the edge of the box, supporting her chin on her cupped palm.

They were dancing again. Grayson came and took out Helen; a number of men arrived clamouring for Stephanie. She finally went out with Verne, but not liking the way he held her left him planted and returned to the box where a number of hilarious young men had gathered.

Harry Belter said:

"What's the trouble, Steve? I never saw you glum before in all my life!"

"I'm not glum," she said with a forced little laugh, "I'm thirsty, Senior Bacchus! Isn't that enough to sadden any girl?"

Later Helen, returning from the floor, paused beside Stephanie to bend over her and whisper:

"Harry Belter is behaving like a fool. Don't take anything more, Steve."

The girl lifted her flushed face and laughed:

"I feel like flinging discretion into the 'fire of spring,'" she said. "That's where most of these people's clothing has disappeared, I fancy." Excitement burned in her pink cheeks and wide grey eyes, and she stood up in the box looking about her, poised lightly as some slim winged thine on the verge of taking flight.

Grismer rose too and whispered to her, but she made a slight, impatient movement with her shoulders.

"Won't you dance this with me?" he repeated, touching her arm.

"No," she said under her breath. "You annoy me, Oswald."

"What!"

"Please don't be quite so devoted.... I'm restless."

She turned and started to leave the box. The others were leaving too, for dancing had begun again. But at the steps she parted with the jolly little company, they descending to the floor, she turning to mount the steps alone.

"Where on earth are you going, Steve?" called back Helen, halting on the steps below.

"I want to see the floor from the top gallery!" replied Stephanie, without turning her head; and she ran lightly upward, her bells and bangles jingling.

Half way up she turned her head. She had not been followed, but she saw Grismer below looking up, watching her flight. And she made no sign of recognition, no gay gesture of amity and adieu; she turned her back and sped upward through the clamour and hazy brilliancy, turned into the first corridor, and vanished like a firefly in a misty thicket.

CHAPTER XIX

At three in the morning the Ball of the Gods was in full and terrific blast and still gathering momentum. A vast musical uproar filled the Garden; the myriad lights glittered like jewels through a fog; the dancing floor was a bewildering, turbulent whirlpool of colour.

Few if any of the dancers had reached the point of satiation; a number, however, had attained the state of saturation.

As far as Cleland could see the only difference between this and a more miscellaneous assemblage seemed to be that the majority of people here knew how to ignore unpleasant lapses in others and how to efface themselves if surprised into accidental indiscretion.

With Lady Button-eyes on his arm he had threaded his way into the supper-room, where the gods, demi-gods and heroes were banqueting most riotously.

It was becoming very rapidly a dubiously mixed affair; Bacchus, with his noisy crew, invaded the supper-room and pronounced Cleland's snub-nosed, button-eyed goddess "tray chick," and there arose immediately a terrific tumult around her—gods and satyrs doing battle for her; but she persisted in her capricious fancy for Cleland. He, however, remained in two minds; one was to abandon Button-eyes, retire and find Stephanie again, in spite of the ever-smoldering resentment he felt for Grismer; the other was to teach himself without loss of time to keep away from her; school himself to do without her; preoccupy himself casually and recklessly with anything that might aid in obliterating his desire for her companionship—with this snub-nosed one, for example.

The desire to see Stephanie remained, nevertheless, sometimes fiercely importunate, sometimes sullenly persistent—seemingly out of all proportion to any sentiment he had ever admittedly entertained for her—out of proportion, also, to his sulky resentment at the folly she had committed with Oswald Grismer.

For, after all, if she ultimately married Grismer in the orthodox way her eccentric pre-nuptial behaviour was nothing more serious than eccentric. And if she didn't, then it meant annulment or divorce; and he realised that nobody outside of the provinces paid any attention to such episodes nowadays. And nobody cared what clod-hoppers thought about anything.

His button-eyed goddess had a pretty good soprano voice and she was using it now, persuaded into a duet by Belter. Cleland looked at her sideways without enthusiasm, undecided, irritated and gloomy. She was Broadway vulgarity personified.

Badger Spink dropped onto a chair on the other side of him:

"Who's your transparent lady friend?" he inquired lazily. "She looks like a gutter-angel. Who is the depraved little beast?"

"I don't know—some actress, I believe—Sonia something-or-other. Do you want her?"

"Thanks. What does she represent? A Kewpie behind a pane of glass?"

"She's a goddess of sorts, I believe. This is getting rather raw, isn't it, Spink?"

Spink yawned and gazed leisurely about him, the satyr's horn emerging from his thick, wavy pompadour hair, accentuating his clever, saturnine features. His expression was slightly Satanic always.

"Yes," he said, "it's turning out rather rough. What do you think of this sort of thing in New York, Cleland? We're drifting toward Babylon. That's the trend since the dance craze swept this moral nation off its moral feet into a million tango joints."

"There's something the matter with us, that's sure," said Cleland. "This sort of thing doesn't belong in the new world."

"It's up to our over-rated American women," sneered Spink. "Only a few years ago we were slobbering over them, worshipping them, painting pictures of 'em—pictures influenced by the French naturalistic school—a lot of cow-faced American females suckling their young. Everybody was yelling for the simple life, summoning the nation back to nature, demanding that babies be produced in every family by the dozen, extolling procreation and lauding the American woman. That's the sort of female we celebrated and pretended to want. Now, look what we've got!—a nation of dancing dolls! A herd of restless, brainless, aggressive, impudent women proclaiming defiance and snapping their fingers at us!"

"I tell you there burns here in the Garden to-night something more than the irresponsible gaiety of a lot of artists and Philistine pleasure-seekers. The world is on the verge of something terrifying; the restlessness of a universal fever is in its veins. Our entire human social structure is throbbing with it; every symptom is ominous of social collapse and a complete disintegration of the old order of civilization!"

"What's your other name, Spink?—Jeremiah?" asked Cleland, laughing.

"No. I'm merely on my favourite topic. Listen to me, my young friend; all England faces strikes and political anarchy in Ireland and India; the restless sex is demanding its rights in London and menacing the Empire. France, betrayed by one of the restless ones, strangling in the clutch of scandal, is standing bewildered by the roar of the proletariat; Russia seethes internally, watching the restless Empress and her accursed priest out of millions of snaky, Asiatic eyes; Portugal has just fallen crashing into fragments around a terrified Queen; China splits open from end to end and vomits forth its dynasty on the tomb of the dead Dowager; Austria watches for the death of an old, old widower—an Imperial mummy long since dead in mind and spirit. Germany, who uses the lesser sex for breeding only, stares stolidly out of pig-like eyes at the Imperial litter of degenerates and defectives dropped with stolid regularity to keep the sty-supply of Hohenzollerns unimpaired. Only radicals like myself feel the cataclysmic waves deep under the earth, symptomatic, ominous of profound and vital readjustments already under way.

"And here in our once great Republic of the West, the fever of universal unrest is becoming apparent in this nation-wide movement for suffrage. State after state becomes a battle-ground and surrenders; accepted standards are shattered, the old social order and balance between the sexes—all the established formalism and belief of a man-constructed status—totters as door and gate and avenue and byway are insanely flung open to the mindless invasion of the restless sex! Don't stop me, Cleland; I am magnificent to-night. Listen! I tell you that political equality, equal opportunity, absolute personal liberty are practically in sight for women! What more is left? Conscious of the itching urge of its constitutional inclination to fuss and fidget, the restless sex, fundamentally gallinaceous, continues to wander on into bournes beyond its ken, hen-like, errant, pensively picking at the transcendently unattainable, but always in motion—motion as mechanical and meaningless as the negative essence of cosmic inertia! ... Now, I'm through with you, Cleland. Thanks for listening. I don't think I want your goddess, after all. She looks too much like a tip-up snipe!"

And he took himself off, yawning.

The rushing din of the orchestra far below came upsoftened to Stephanie's ears, where she stood at the rail of the topmost gallery and looked down into the glimmering depths of the Ball of all the Gods.

Her jewelled fingers rested on the rail, her slender body pressed against it; she stood with bent head, gazing down into the vortex, pensive, sombrely preoccupied with an indefinable anger that possessed her.

The corridor behind her was full of shadowy figures scurrying to hazardous rendezvous. She was vaguely aware of encounters and pursuits; stifled laughter, sudden gusts of whispering, hurried adieux, hasty footfalls and the ghostly rustle of silks in flight.

She turned restlessly and went up into the corridor. A dryad was performing flip-flaps there and a gale of laughter and applause arose from her comrades watching her in a semi-circle.

The Olympians, too, all seemed to have gathered there for a frolic—Zeus, Hermes, the long-legged Astarte, the amazingly realistic Aphrodite, and Eros, more realistic still—all clasping hands and dancing a ring-around-a-rosy while Bacchus and Ariadne in the centre performed a breakdown which drew frantic shouts of approval from the whirling ring.

Then, in this hilarious circle, Stephanie caught sight of the snub-nose and transparent raiment of the button-eyed Goddess of Night, and next her, hand clasping hand, she recognized Cleland as another link in the rapidly rotating ring.

Aphrodite and Eros, hand locked in hand, were singing the song they had made so popular in "The Prince of Argolis" early in the winter:

"Mrs. Aphrodite

Gave her pretty sonny

Lots of golden curls

But little golden money,
Dressed him in a nightie!—
(Listen to me, girls!)
Love of golden curls
Leads the world astray!
(Listen to me, honey!)
Love of golden money
Acts the selfsame way!"

Breathless with laughter the Grecian gods galloped round and round in a dizzy circle, flushed faces flashed past Stephanie, flying draperies and loosened hair fluttered and streamed and glimmered in confused sequence before her angry eyes.

Suddenly the mad dance broke up and flew into fragments, scattering its reeling, panting devotees into prancing couples in every direction.

And straight into this wild confusion stepped Stephanie, her pretty eyes brilliant with wrath, her face a trifle pale.

"Jim!"

He let go of Lady Button-eyes in astonishment and turned around.

Stephanie said very coolly:

"If you're going to raise the devil, raise him with me, please!"

Lady Button-eyes was not pleased and she showed it by stamping, which alone had sufficiently fixed her level if she had not also placed both hands on her hips and laughed scornfully when Cleland took leave of her and walked over to Stephanie.

"Where are the others?" he inquired, rather red at being discovered with such a crew. "You're not alone, are you, Steve?"

"Not now," she said sweetly; and passed her left arm through his and clasped her right hand over it. "Now," she said with an excited little laugh, "I am ready to raise the devil with you. Take me wherever you like, Jim."

The insulted gods gazed upon her with astonishment as she lifted her small head and sent an indifferent glance like an arrow at random among them. Then, not further noticing them, and absolutely indifferent to the button-eyed one, she strolled leisurely out of Olympus with her slightly disconcerted captive and disappeared from their view along the southern corridor. But once out of their range of vision her hot wrath returned.

"It was abominable," she said in a low, tense voice, "—your going off that way, when I told you the whole evening would be spoiled for me without you! I am hurt and angry, Jim."

But his smouldering wrath also flickered into flame now.

"You had Grismer, didn't you!" he said. "What do you care whether I am with you or not?"

"What do you mean? Yes, of course I had him. What has that to do with *you*?"

He replied with light insolence:

"Nothing. I'm not your husband."

His words fell like a blow: she caught her breath with the hurt of them; then:

"Is that why you have avoided me?" she demanded in a tone of such concentrated passion that the unexpected flare-up startled him. It surprised her, too: for, all at once, in her heart something contracted agonizingly, and a surge of furious resentment flooded her, almost strangling speech.

"Why are you indifferent? Why are—are you unkind?" she stammered. "I've just found you again after all these years, haven't I? What do other people matter to us? Why should Oswald interfere between you and me? You and I haven't had each other for years! I—I can't stand it—to have you unkind—indifferent—to have you leave me this way when I want you—so desperately——"

"I didn't leave you," he retorted sullenly. "You went away with—the man you married——"

"Don't speak of him that way!" she interrupted hotly. "Nobody speaks of that affair at all!"

"Why not? You *did* marry him, didn't you?"

"What of it!" she flamed back. "What has that to do with you and me! *Why* do you refer to it? It's my personal affair, anyway!"

He turned toward her, exasperated:

"If you think," he said, "that your behaviour with Grismer means nothing to me, you'd better undeceive yourself! ... Or I'll do it for you in a way you can't mistake!"

"Undeceive me?" she repeated uneasily. "How do you mean?"

"By making a fight for you myself," he said, "by doing my best to get you back!"

"I don't know what you mean, Jim," she repeated, her grey eyes intent on his flushed face.... "Do you believe you have been insulted by what I did? Is that what you mean?"

He did not answer. They walked on, slowly pacing the deserted corridor. Her head was lowered now; her lips a trifle tremulous.

"I—didn't suppose you'd take—what I did—*that* way," she said unsteadily. "I—respect and love you.... I supposed I was at liberty—to dispose of—myself. I didn't imagine you cared—very much——"

Suddenly he freed his arm from her clasped fingers and passed it around her waist; and she caught her breath and placed her hand tightly over his to hold it there.

"You adorable boy," she whispered, "am I forgiven? And you *do* care for me, don't you, Jim?"

"Care for you!" he repeated in a low, menacing voice. "I care for nobody else in the world, Steve!"

She laughed happily, yielding confidently to his embrace, responding swiftly and adorably and with a frank unreserve that told a more innocent story than his close caress and boyish heart on fire confirmed.

And, for the moment, she let him have his way, gaily enduring and humorously content with a reconciliation somewhat exaggerated and over-demonstrative on his part.

But presently his lips on her flushed face, on her hair, on her throat, disconcerted her, and her own lips parted in dismayed and laughing protest at an ardour entirely new to her.

He merely kissed her fragrant mouth into silence, looking steadily into her grey eyes now widening with perplexed and troubled inquiry.

"I love you," he said. "I want you back. Now, do you understand, Steve? I love you! I love you!"

Confused, crushed hotly in his embrace, she stared blankly at him for one dizzy instant; then, in silence, she twisted her supple body backward and aside, and with both nervous hands broke loose the circle of his arms.

They were both rather white now; her breath came and went irregularly, checked in her throat with a little sob at intervals. She leaned back against the wall, one jewelled hand against her breast, looking aside and away from where he stood.

"I *told* you," he said, unsteadily.

She remained silent, keeping her gaze resolutely averted.

"You understand now, don't you?" he asked.

She nodded.

Then he caught her in his arms again, and she threw back her lovely head, looking at him with frightened eyes, defending her lips with a bare, jewelled arm across them.

He laughed breathlessly and kissed the partly clenched fingers.

"Don't," she whispered, her grey eyes brilliant with fear.

"Do you understand that I am in love with you, Steve?"

"Let me go, Jim——"

"*Do* you?"

"*Don't* kiss me—that way——"

"Do you believe me?"

"I don't want to!——" Suddenly she turned terribly white in his arms, swayed a moment against him. He released her, steadied her; she passed one arm through his, leaning heavily on him.

"Are you faint, Steve?" he whispered.

"A—little. It's nothing. The air here is stifling.... I'm tired." ... She dropped her head against his shoulder. Her lids were half closed as they descended the steps, he guiding her.

It seemed to her an interminable descent. She felt as though she were falling through space into a glittering, roaring abyss. In their box sat Helen and Grayson, gossiping gaily together and waiting for another dance to begin. Cleland warned Stephanie in a whisper, and she lifted her head and straightened up with an effort.

She said mechanically:

"I'm going home; I'm very tired."

Helen and Grayson rose and the former came toward her inquiringly.

Stephanie smiled:

"Jim will take me back," she said. "Don't let me disturb your pleasure. And tell Oswald I was very sleepy.... And not to come to the studio for a day or two. Good night, dear."

She made a humorously tired little gesture of farewell to Grayson also, and, taking Cleland's arm again, sauntered with him toward the lobby.

"Get your overcoat and my wraps," she said in a colourless, even voice. "I have a car outside. Here's the call-check. I'll wait over there for you."

Her car, a toy limousine, was ultimately found. Cleland redeemed his overcoat and her wrap. When he came back for her she smiled at him, suffered him to swathe her in the white silk cloak, and, laying her dainty hand lightly on his sleeve, went out with him into the lamp-lit grey of dawn.

"You are feeling better," he said as they seated themselves in the limousine and the little car rolled away southward.

"Yes. It was the stifling atmosphere there, I suppose."

"It was horribly close," he assented.

They remained silent for a while. Then, abruptly:

"Have I made you angry, Steve?" he asked.

She looked up and laughed:

"You adorable boy," she said.

"You don't mind if I'm in love with you?" he asked.

"I haven't any mind. I can't seem to think.... But I don't think you'd better kiss me until I collect my senses again.... Please don't, Jim."

They became silent again until the car drew up before her door. She had two keys in her cloak pocket; she paused to give the chauffeur an order, turning to ask Cleland whether he didn't want the car to take him to the Hotel Rochambeau.

"Thanks; it's only a step. I had rather walk."

So the car drove away; Cleland opened the front door for her, then her own studio door. She felt around the corner in the darkness and switched on the electric bulb in a standing lamp.

"Good night, Steve," he said, taking her hand in both of his.

"Good night.... Unless you care to talk to me for a little while."

"It's four o'clock in the morning."

"I can't sleep—I know that."

He said in a low voice:

"Besides, I am very much in love with you. I think I had better go back."

"Oh.... Do you think so?"

"Don't you?"

"I told you that I haven't recovered enough sense to think."

She crossed the threshold and walked into the studio, dropping her cloak across a chair; and presently halted before the empty fireplace, gazing into its smoke-blackened depths.

For a few moments she stood there in a brown study—a glittering, exquisite figure in the subdued light which fell in tiny points of fire on gem and ring, bracelet and girdle, and tipped the gilded sandals on her little naked feet with sparks of living flame.

Then she turned her charming young head and looked across at him where he stood on the threshold.

"What do you think?" she said. "Ought you to go?"

"I ought to. But I don't think I shall."

"No, don't go," she said with a little laugh. "After all, if we're not to remain brother and sister any longer, there's a most fascinating novelty in your being here."

He came in and closed the door. She made room for him on the sofa and he flung his coat across her cloak and seated himself.

"Now," she said, dropping one silken knee over the other and clasping her hands around it, "how much can we care for each other without being silly? You know I have a dreadful intuition that I'd better not kiss you any more. Not that I don't adore you as much as I always did——"

She turned squarely around and looked at him out of her lovely eyes:

"You took me by surprise. I didn't understand. Then, suddenly I lost my senses and became panicky. I was scared stiff, Jim—you kissed me so many times——"

He reddened and looked down. Under his eyes her bare foot hung in its golden sandal—an exquisite, snowy little foot, quite perfectly fashioned to match her hands' soft symmetry.

"If you loved me," he said, "you would not care how many times I kissed you."

"But you kept on—and you kissed my eyes and throat——"

"You wouldn't care what I did if you loved me."

"But they were unusual places to be kissed. I was scared. Did you think me ridiculous? It was rather startling, you know. It was such a complete novelty."

She admitted it so naïvely that he laughed in spite of his chagrin.

"Steve," he said, "I don't know what to do about it. I'm falling more deeply in love with you every moment; and you are merely kind and sweet and friendly about it——"

"I'm *intensely* interested!" she said.

"Interested," he repeated; "yes, that describes it."

"A girl couldn't help being interested when a man she had always adored as a brother suddenly takes her into his arms and kisses her in unusual places," she said, "—and does it a great number of times——"

"Probably you kept count," he said with boyish sarcasm.

She laughed outright:

"I wish I had. It was a perfectly shameless performance. If you ever do it again I shall keep count—out loud!"

"Is that all you'll do?"

"What else is there to do?" she inquired, smiling a trifle uneasily.

"You might find it in your heart to respond."

"How can my heart hold any more of you than it does and always has?" she asked with pretty impatience.

"*Can't* you love me?"

"I don't know how to any more than I do."

"But you did not find it agreeable when I kissed you."

"I—don't know what I felt.... We always kissed." She began to laugh. "I enjoyed *that*; but I don't think you did, always. You sometimes looked rather bored, Jim."

"I'm getting well paid back," he said.

This seemed to afford her infinite delight; there was malice in her grey eyes now, and a hint of pretty mockery in her laughter.

"To think," she said, "that James Cleland should ever become sentimental with poor little Stephanie Quest! What an unbending! What condescension! What a come-down! Oh, Jim, if I've really got you at last I'm going to raise the very devil with you!"

"You're doing it."

"Am I? I hope I am! I mean to torment you! Why, when I think of the long, long years of childish adoration and awe—of the days when I tagged after you, grateful to be noticed, thankful when you found time for me——" She clapped her hands together delightedly, enchanted with his glum and reddening face. For what she said was the truth; he knew it, though she did not realize how true it had been—and meant merely to exaggerate.

"Also," she said, "you leave me quite alone for three whole years when you could have come back at the end of two!"

His face darkened and he bit his lip.

"You're quite right," he said in a quiet voice. "A girl couldn't very well fall in love with that sort of man."

There was a silence. She had been enjoying her revenge, but she had not expected him to take it so seriously.

He sat there with lowered head, considering, gnawing at his under-lip in silence. She had not intended to hurt him. She was inexperienced enough with him to be worried. His features seemed older, leaner, full of unfamiliar shadows—disturbingly aloof and stern.

She hesitated—the swift, confused memory of an hour before checking her for an instant, then she leaned toward him, quite certain of what would happen—silent and curious as he drew her into his arms.

She was very silent, too, listening to his impetuous, broken avowal—suffering his close embrace, his lips on her eyes and mouth and throat once more. The enormous novelty of it preoccupied her; the intense interest in his state of mind. Her curiosity held her spellbound, too, and unresponsive but fascinated.

She lay very quietly in his arms, her lovely head resting on his shoulder, sometimes with eyes closed, sometimes watching him, meeting his eyes with a faint smile.

Contact with him no longer frightened her. Her mind was clear, busy with this enormous novelty, searching for the reason of it, striving to understand his passion which she shyly recognized with an odd feeling of pride and tenderness, but to which there was nothing in her that responded—nothing more than tender loyalty and the old love she had always given him.

The grey tranquillity of her eyes, virginal and clear—the pulseless quiet of the girl chilled him.

"You don't love me, Steve, do you?"

"Not—as you—wish me to."

"Can't you?"

"I don't know."

"Is there any chance?"

She looked out across the studio, considering, and her grey eyes grew vague and remote.

"I don't know, Jim.... I think that something has been left out of me.... Whatever it is. I don't know how to love—fall in love—as you wish me to. I don't know how to go about it. Perhaps it's because I've never thought about it. It's never occupied my mind."

"Then," he burst out, "how in God's name did you ever come to marry!"

She looked up at him gravely:

"That is very different," she said.

"Then you *are* in love with him!"

"I told you that he fascinates me."

"Is it *love*?" he asked violently.

"I don't know."

"You *must* know! You've got a mind!"

"It doesn't explain what I feel for him. I can't put it into words."

He drew her roughly to him, bent over her, looked into her eyes, and kissed her lips again and again.

"Can't you love me, Steve? *Can't* you?" he stammered.

"I—want to. I wish I did—the way you want me to."

"Will you try?"

"I don't know how to try."

"Do your lips on mine mean nothing to you?"

"Yes.... You are so dear.... I am wonderfully contented—and not afraid."

After a moment she released herself, laughed, and sat up, adjusting her hair with one hand and resting against his shoulder.

"A fine scandal if Helen should come in," she remarked. "It's odd to think of myself as married. And that's another thing, Jim. It never occurred to me until now, but I've no business to give myself up to you as I have to-night." She leaned forward on one elbow, musing for a while, then, lifting her head with a troubled smile: "But what is a girl to do when her brother suddenly turns into her lover? Must she forbid him to kiss her? And refrain from kissing him?——" She flung one arm around his neck impulsively. "I *won't* forbid you! I would have to if I were in love with you in the same way. But I'm not and I don't care what you do. And whatever you do, I adore anyway."

A key rattled in the lock; she sprang to her feet and went toward the door. Helen came in, and she saw Grayson and Grismer standing in the hallway.

"Come in everybody!" she cried. "Shall we all have breakfast before we part? Don't you think it would be delightful, Phil? Don't you, Oswald? And you know we could take up the rugs and dance while the coffee is boiling. Wait! I'll turn on the music-box!——"

Helen and Grayson deliberately began a tango; Grismer came over to where Cleland was standing:

"They're still dancing in the Garden," he said pleasantly. "Did you and Stephanie get enough of it?"

CHAPTER XX

Cleland, being young, required sleep, and it was not until noon that he awoke.

Cool-headed retrospection during tubbing and dressing increased his astonishment at the manner in which he had spent his first day in New York after the years of absence. For into that one day had been crowded a whole gamut of experience and of sensations that seemed incredible when he thought them over.

Every emotion that a young man could experience seemed to have been called into play during that bewildering day and night—curiosity, resentment, apprehension, anger, jealousy, love, passion. And their swift and unexpected sequence had confused him, wrought him up to a pitch of excitement which set every nerve on edge.

He could not comprehend what had happened, what he had experienced and said and done as he stood at his window looking out into the sunshine of the quiet street; and yet, just around the corner the girl who was the cause and reason of it all lay still asleep, in all probability.

Breakfast was served in his room and he ate it with a perfectly healthy appetite. Then he lighted a cigarette and walked to the window again to stare silently put across the sunny street and marshall his thoughts into some semblance of order.

The aromatic smoke from his cigarette curled against the window pane and he gazed absently through it at the vague phantom of a girl's face which memory evoked unbidden.

What had happened? Was it really love? Was it anger, wounded amour-propre, jealousy? Was it resentment and disgust at the silly, meaningless thing that one whom he had considered as his own kinswoman had done in his absence? Was it a determination to tear her loose that had started the thing—an unreasoning, impulsive attempt at vengeance, born of hurt pride that incited him to get her back? For the bond between her and Grismer seemed to him intolerable, hateful—a thing he would not endure if he could shatter it.

Why? Was it because he himself had fallen in love with a girl whom, heretofore, he had regarded with the tranquil, tolerant affection of a brother? Was it love? Was there any other name for the impulse which had suddenly overmastered him when he caught this girl in his arms, confused, frightened, stunned her with hot, incoherent declarations? Had he even really meant what he had said—not in the swift hurricane of passion which had enveloped him like a flame when he held her waist enlaced and the sweetness of her face and throat and hair blinded him to everything else—but in the cold after-light of retrospection did he now mean what he had said last night?

Or had it all been due to the place and the hour—the relaxing of convention in the shattering din of music and laughter—the whirlwind of gaiety and excitement—the girl's beauty—the sudden thrill of his contact with her? Was that what had accounted for what he had done and said?—brute impulse loosed by passion born out of nothing

more noble than the moment's mental intoxication—nothing more real than ephemeral emotion, excitement, sheer physical sensation?

It was not like him. He realized that. Hitherto his brain had been in control of his emotions. His was a clear mind, normally. Impulse seldom tripped him.

He had never been in love—never even tried to persuade himself that he had been, even when he had, in his boyish loneliness in Paris, built for himself a bewitching ideal out of a very familiar Stephanie and had addressed to this ideal several reams of romantic nonsense. That had been merely the safety valve working in the very full and lonely heart of a boy.

Even in the gay, ephemeral, irresponsible affairs that occurred from time to time during his career abroad—even when in the full tide of romantic adoration for his mundane Countess, and fairly wallowing in flattered gratitude for her daintily amused condescension, did he ever deceive himself into believing he was in love.

And now, in the lurid light of the exaggerated, bewildering, disquieting events of the preceding day and night, he was trying to think clearly and honestly—trying to reconcile his deeds and words with what he had known of himself—trying to find out what really was the matter with him.

He did not know. He knew that Stephanie had exasperated him—exasperated him to reckless passion—exasperated him even more by not responding to that passion. He had declared his love for her; he had attempted to drive the declaration into her comprehension by the very violence of reiteration. The tranquil, happy loyalty, which always had been his, was all he evoked in her for all the impulsive vows he made, for all his reckless emotion loosened with the touch of her lips—so hotly ungoverned when her grey eyes looked into his, honestly perplexed, sweetly searching to comprehend the source of these fierce flames which merely warmed her with their breath.

"It's a curious thing," he thought, "that a man, part of whose profession is to write about love and analyze it, doesn't know whether he's in love or not."

It was quite true. He didn't know. Accepted symptoms were lacking. He had not awakened thrilled with happiness at the memory of the night before. He awoke dazed and doubtful that all these things had happened, worried, searching in his mind for some reason for his behaviour.

And, except that a man had taken her out of his keeping, and that resentment and jealousy had incited him to recover her, and, further, in the excitement of the attempt, that he had suddenly found himself involved in deeper, fiercer emotions than he had bargained for, he could come to no conclusion concerning his actual feeling for Stephanie.

He spent the day hunting for a studio-apartment.

About five o'clock he called her on the telephone; and heard her voice presently:

"Have you quite recovered, Jim? I feel splendid!"

"Recovered? I was all right this morning when I woke up."

"I mean your senses?"

"Oh. Did you think I lost them last night, Steve?"

"Didn't you?"

Her voice was very sweet but there was in it a hint of hidden laughter.

"No," he said shortly.

"Oh. Then you really were in your right senses last night?" she inquired.

"Certainly. Were you?"

"Well, for a little while I seemed to have lost the power of thinking. But after that I was intensely, consciously, deeply interested and profoundly curious." He could hear her laughing.

"Curious about what?" he demanded.

"About your state of mind, Jim. The situation was such a novelty, too. I was trying to comprehend it—trying to consider what a girl should do in such a curious emergency."

"Emergency?" he repeated.

"Certainly. Do you fancy I'm accustomed to such novelties as you introduced me to last night?"

"What do you think about them now?"

"I'm slightly ashamed of us both. We *were* rather silly, you know——"

"*You* were not," he interrupted drily.

"Is that a tribute or a reproach?" came her gay voice over the wire. "I don't quite know how to take it!"

"Reassure yourself, Steve. You were most circumspect and emotionless——"

"Jim! That is brutal and untrue! I was not circumspect!"

"You were the other, then."

"What a perfectly cruel and outrageous slander! You've made me unhappy, now. And all day I've been so absolutely happy in thinking of what happened."

"Is that true?" he asked in an altered voice.

"Of course it's true!"

"You just said you were ashamed——"

"I was, very, very slightly; but I've been too happy to be very much ashamed!"

"You darling!——"

"Oh! The gentleman bestows praise! Such a kind gentleman to perceive merit and confer his distinguished approval. Any girl ought to endeavour to earn further marks of consideration and applause from so gracious a gentleman——"

"Steve, you tormenting little wretch, can't you be serious with me?"

"I am," she said, laughing. "Tell me what you've been doing to-day?"

"Hunting for lodgings. What have you been doing?"

"Watching Helen make a study of a horse out in the covered court. Then we had tea. Then Oswald dropped in and played the piano divinely, as he always does. Then

Helen and I started to dress for dinner. Then you called. Where did you look for lodgings?"

"Oh, I went to about all the studio buildings——"

"Aren't you going to open the house?"

"No. It's too lonely."

"Yes," she said, "it would be too lonely. You and I couldn't very well live there together unless we had an older woman."

"No."

"So it's better not to open it until"—she laughed gaily—"you marry some nice girl. Then it will be safe enough for me to call on the Cleland family, I fancy. Won't it, Jim?"

"Quite," he replied drily. "But when I marry that nice girl, you won't have far to go when you call on the Cleland family."

"Oh, how kind! You mean to board me, Jim?"

"You know what I *do* mean," he said.

"I wonder! Is it really a declaration of serious and respectable intentions? But you're quite safe. And I'm afraid you know it. Tell me, did you find an apartment to suit you?"

"No."

"Why not come here? There's a studio and apartment which will be free May first. Oh, Jim, please take it! If you say so I'll telephone the agent *now*! Shall I? It would be too heavenly if we were under the same roof again!"

"Do you *want* me, Steve? After—and in spite of everything?"

"*Want* you?" He heard her happy, scornful laughter. Then: "We're dining out, Jim; but come to-morrow. I'll telephone now that you'll take the studio. May I, Jim dear?"

"Yes," he said. "And I'll come to you to-morrow."

"You angel boy! I *wish* I weren't going out to-night. Thank you, Jim, dear, for making me happy again."

"*Are* you?"

"Indescribably. I don't think you know what your kindness to me means. It makes a different person of me. It fills and thrills and inspires me. Why, Jim, it actually is health and life to me. And when you are unkind—it seems to paralyze me—check something in my mind. I can't explain——"

"Steve!"

"Yes?"

"Could I come in for a moment now?"

"I'm dressing. Oh, Jim, I'm sorry, but I'm late as it is. You know I want you, don't you?"

"All right; to-morrow, then," he said in happy voice.

He had been sitting in his room for an hour, thinking—letting his mind wander unchecked.

If he were not really in love with Stephanie, how could a mere conversation over the wire with her give him such pleasure?

The day, drawing to its close without his seeing her, had seemed colourless and commonplace; but the sound of her gay voice over the wire had changed that—had made the day complete.

"I believe I *am* in love," he said aloud. He rose and paced the room in the dusk, questioning, considering his own uncertainty.

For the "novelty"—as Stephanie called it—of last night's fever had not been a novelty to her alone. Never before had he been so deeply moved, so swept off his feet, so regardless of a self-control habitual to him.

Perhaps anger and jealousy had started it. But these ignoble emotions could not seem to account for the happiness that hearing her voice had just given him.

Even the voice of a beloved sister doesn't stir a young man to such earnest and profound reflection as that in which he was now immersed, indifferent even to the dinner hour, which had long been over.

"I believe," he said aloud to himself, "that I'm falling very seriously in love with Steve.... And if I am, it's a rather desperate outlook.... She *seems* to be in love with Grismer—damn him! ... I don't know how to face such a thing.... She's married him and she doesn't live with him.... She admits frankly that he fascinates her.... There *are* women who never love.... I seem to want her, anyway.... I *think* I do.... It's a mess! ... Why in God's name did she do such a thing if she wasn't in love with him—or if she didn't expect to be? Is she in love with him? She isn't with *me*.... I'm certainly drifting into love with Steve.... Can I stop myself? ... I ought to be able to.... Hadn't I better?"

He stood still, thinking, the street lamps' rays outside illuminating his room with a dull radiance.

Presently he switched on the light, seated himself at the desk, and wrote:

STEVE, DEAR:

I am falling in love with you very seriously and very deeply. I don't know what to do about it.

JIM.

He was about to undress and retire late that night when a letter was slipped under his door:

You sentimental and adorable boy! What is there to do? The happiest girl in New York, very sleepy and quite ready for bed, bids you good night, enchanted by your note.

STEVIE.

CHAPTER XXI

To have returned after three years abroad and to have slipped back into the conventional life of the circles to which he had been accustomed in the city of his birth might not have been very easy for Cleland. To readjust himself among what was unfamiliar proved easier, perhaps. For his family circle existed no longer; the old servants were gone; the house had been closed for a long time now.

At his college club unfamiliar faces were already in the majority, men of his own time having moved on to the University, Union, Racquet and Knickerbocker, leaving the usual residue of undesirables and a fresh influx from his college. And he was too young in letters to be identified yet with any club which meant anything except the conveniences of a hotel.

Among friend and acquaintances of his age there had been many changes, too; much shifting and readjustment of groups and circles incident to marriages and deaths and the scattering migration ever in progress from New York.

It was an effort for him to pick up the threads again; and he did not make the effort. It was much simpler to settle down here in these quiet, old-time streets within stone's throw of the artists' quarter of the city where Stephanie lived—where a few boyhood friends of artistic proclivities had taken up quarters, where acquaintances were easily made, easily avoided; and where the informalities of existence made life more easy, more direct, and, alas, much more irresponsible. Chelsea, with a conscious effort and a lurking smirk, mirrored the Latin Quarter to the best of its ability.

It did pretty well. There were more exaggerations, more eccentricities, less spontaneity and less work in Chelsea than in the Latin Quarter. Too many of its nomadic denizens were playing a self-conscious part; too few of them possessed the intelligence and training necessary for self-expression in any creative profession. Otherwise, they were as emotional, as casual, as unkempt, as vain, and as improvident as any rapin of the original Latin Quarter.

Cleland met many of the elect even before he had settled down in his new studio-apartment on the top floor of the same building where Stephanie and Helen lived.

The quarter was peppered with tea-rooms and cafés and restaurants sufficiently cheap to attract artistic youth. Also, there reigned in that section of the city a general and resolute determination to be bohemian; a number of damsels errant and transplanted, shock-headed youths cooked in their own quarters, strolled about the streets in bed-room slippers, or visited one another bare-headed and adorned with paint-smeared smocks.

And there was, of course, much deviltry with cigarettes and cheap claret in restaurant and café—frequent outbursts of horse-play and song, especially if Philistine visitors were detected in the vicinity. And New York French was frequently though briefly employed as the limited medium for exchanging views on matters important only to the inmates of Chelsea and its purlieus.

"But Washington Square bohemians are a harmless, friendly people," remarked Helen to Cleland one morning late in May, when he stopped on his way out to breakfast to watch her modelling a horse in clay. "They're like actor-folk; they live in a world entirely self-created which marvels at and admires and watches them; they pose for its benefit, playing as faithfully as they know how their chosen rôles—painter, writer, critic, sculptor, composer. Nobody in the outside real and busy world notices them; but they think they're under incessant and envious observation and they strut happily through the little painted comedy of life, living an unreal existence, dying undeceived. The real tragedy of it all they mercifully never suspect—the utter lack of interest in them taken by real people."

She went on modelling, apparently amused by her own analysis.

"Where is Stephanie?" he inquired, after a slight pause.

"Out somewhere with Oswald, I believe."

"It's rather early."

"They sometimes get up early and breakfast together at Claremont," remarked Helen, working serenely away. The freckled livery-stable lad who held the horse for her and occasionally backed him into the pose again continued to chew gum and watch the pretty sculptor with absorbed interest.

"I've got such an interesting commission," she said, wetting down her clay with a huge and dripping sponge. "It's for the new Academy of Arts and Letters to be built uptown, and my equestrian figure is to be cast in silver bronze for the great marble court."

"What is the subject?" he asked, preoccupied by what she had told him about Stephanie, yet watching this busy and efficient young girl who, with the sleeves of her blue blouse rolled up, displaying her superb young arms, stood vigorously kneading a double handful of clay and studying the restless horse with clear and very beautiful brown eyes.

"The subject? 'Aspiration.' I made some sketches—a winged horse taking flight upward. A nude female figure, breathless, with dishevelled hair, has just flung itself upon the rearing, wide-winged Pegasus and is sticking there like a cat to the back fence—hanging on tooth and nail with one leg just over and the other close against the beast's ribs, and her desperate fingers in the horse's mane.... I don't know. It sounds interesting but it may be too violent. But I've had that idea—hope, aspiration, fear and determination clinging to a furious winged animal that is just starting upward like a roaring sky-rocket——"

She turned her head, laughing:

"Is it a rotten idea?"

"I don't know," he said absently. "It's worth trying out, anyway."

She nodded; and he went on about the business of breakfast. But had now no appetite.

There was one thing, Cleland soon found out, against which he was helpless. Stephanie frequented Grismer at any hour of the day and evening that her fancy prompted.

This perplexed him and made him sullen; but when he incautiously started to remonstrate with her one evening her surprise and anger flashed like a clear little flame, and she explained very clearly what was the essence of personal liberty, and that the one thing she would not tolerate from him or anybody else was any invasion of her freedom of thought and action.

Silenced, enraged, and humiliated at the rebuke he had retired to his studio to sulk like Achilles—a sullen mourner at the bier of love. For he fully and firmly determined to eradicate this girl from his life and devote it to scourging the exasperating sex of which she was a beautiful but baffling member.

The trouble with Stephanie, however, was that she could not seem to see the tragedy in his life or understand that a young man desired to suffer nobly and haughtily and at his own leisure and convenience.

For there came a knock at his door after his second day of absenting himself, and when he incautiously opened it, she marched in and took him gaily into her unembarrassed arms and bestowed upon his astonished countenance a hearty, wholesome and vigorous smack. Moreover, she laughed and jeered and tormented and poked merciless fun at him until she had badgered and worried and hectorred and beaten the sulkiness out of him. Then she admonished him:

"Don't ever do it again!" she said. "We are free, you and I. What we are to each other alone concerns us, not what we may choose to do or be to others."

"You don't care what I do, Steve," he said.

"I care what you do to me!"

"How I behave otherwise doesn't concern you?"

"No. It would be an impertinence for me to meddle. For," she added in smiling paraphrase:

"If you are not nice to me

What care I how nice you be—

to other girls?"

"Do you really mean that it wouldn't make any difference to you what I do? Suppose I take you at your word and become enamoured of some girl and devote myself to her?"

"You mean a nice girl, don't you?" she inquired.

"Any old kind."

She considered the matter, surprised.

"I couldn't interfere with your personal liberty," she concluded, "—whatever you choose to do."

"How would you feel about my frequenting some pretty studio model, for example?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"It wouldn't affect you one way or the other, then?"

"It ought not to—provided you are always nice to me."

"That," he exclaimed, "is a cold-blooded, fishy creed!"

"That's the creed of tolerance, Jim."

"All right. Live up to it, then. And I'll try to, too," he added drily. "Because, sometimes when you're off, God knows where, with Grismer, I feel lonely enough to drift with the first attractive girl I come across."

"Why don't you?" she asked, flushing slightly.

"The reason I haven't," he said, "is because I'm in love with you."

She was standing with head bent, but now she looked up quickly.

"You adorable infant," she laughed. "What a child you really are, after all! Come," she added mischievously, "let's kiss like good children and let the gods occupy themselves with our future. It's their business, not ours. I'm glad you think you're in love with me. But, Jim, I'm in love with life. And you're such an important part of life that, naturally, I include you!"

She bent forward and touched his lips with hers, daintily, deftly avoiding his arms, her eyes gay with malice.

"No," she laughed, "not that, if you please, dear friend! It rumples and raises the deuce with my hair and gown. But we *are* friends again, aren't we, Jim?"

"Yes," he said in a low voice, "—if you can give me no more than friendship."

"It's the most wonderful thing in the world!" she insisted.

"You've read that somewhere."

"You annoy me, Jim! It is my own conclusion. There's nothing finer for anybody—unless they want children. And I don't."

Neither did he. No young man does. But what she said struck him as unpleasantly modern.

He met Grismer here and there in the artistic channels of the city; often in Stephanie's studio, frequently in other studios, and occasionally amid gatherings at restaurants, theatres, art galleries.

At first he had been civil but cool, avoiding any tête-à-tête with his old school-fellow. But, little by little, he became aware of several things which slightly influenced his attitude toward Grismer.

One thing became plain; the man had no intimates. There was not a man Cleland met who seemed to care very much for Grismer; he seemed to have no frank and cordial friendships among men, no pals. Yet, he was considered clever and amusing where people gathered; he interested men without evoking their personal sympathy; he interested women intensely with his unusual good looks and the light, elusive quality of his intelligence.

Always amiably suave, graceful of movement, alert and considerate of feminine fancies, moods and caprices, he was welcomed everywhere by them in the circles which he sauntered into. But he was merely accepted by men.

So, in spite of his resentment at what Grismer had done, Cleland felt slightly sorry for this friendless man. For Grismer's was a solitary soul, and Cleland, who had suffered from loneliness enough to understand it, gradually became conscious of the intense loneliness of this man, even amid his popularity with women and their sympathetic and sentimental curiosity concerning him.

But no man seemed to care for closer intimacy with Grismer than a friendly acquaintanceship offered. There was something about him that did not seem to attract or invite men's careless comradeship or confidence.

"It's those floating golden specks in his eyes," said Belter, discussing him one day with Cleland. "He's altogether too auriferous and graceful to be entirely genuine, Cleland—too easy and too damned bland. Poor beggar; have you noticed how shabby and shiny he's getting? I guess he's down and out for fair financially."

Cleland had noticed it. The man's linen was visibly frayed. His clothes, too, betrayed his meagre circumstances, yet he wore them so well, and there was such a courtly indifference in the man, that the shabby effect seemed due to a sort of noble carelessness.

Cleland had never called on Grismer. He had no inclination to do so, no particular reason except that Grismer had invited him several times. Yet, an uneasy curiosity lurked within him concerning Grismer's abode and whether Stephanie, always serenely unconventional, ever went there.

He didn't care to think she did, yet, after all, the girl was this man's legal wife, and there was no moral law to prevent her going there and taking up her abode if she were so inclined.

Cleland never asked her if she went there, perhaps dreading her reply.

As far as that was concerned, he could not find any of his friends or acquaintances who had ever been in Grismer's lodgings. Nobody even seemed to know exactly where they were, except that Grismer lived somewhere in Bleecker Street and never entertained.

At times, when Stephanie was not to be found, and his unhappy inference placed her in Grismer's company, he felt an unworthy inclination to call on Grismer and find out whether the girl was there. But the impulse was a low one, and made him ashamed, and his envy and jealousy disgusted him with himself.

Besides, his state of mind was painfully confused and uncertain in regard to Stephanie. He was in love with her, evidently. But the utter lack of sentimental response on her part afforded his love for her no nourishment.

He traversed the entire scale of emotions. When he was not with her he often came to the exasperated conclusion that he could learn to forget her; when he was with her the idea seemed rather hopeless.

The unfortunate part of it seemed to be that, like his father's, his was a single-track heart. He'd never been in love, unless this was love. Anyway, Stephanie occupied the single track, and there seemed to be no switches, no sidings, nothing to clear that track.

He was exceedingly miserable at times.

However, his mind was equipped with a whole terminal full of tracks and every one was busy in the service of his profession.

For a month, now, he had been installed in his studio-apartment on the top floor. He picked up on Fourth and on Madison Avenues enough preciously rickety furniture to make him comfortable and drive friends to distraction when they ventured to trust themselves to chair or sofa.

But his writing table and corner-chair were solid and modern, and he had half a dozen things under construction—a novel, some short stories, some poems which he modestly mentioned as verses.

Except for the unexplored mazes in which first love had involved him he was happy—exceedingly happy. But, to a creative mind, happiness born of self-expression is a weird, uncanny, composite emotion, made up of ecstatic hope and dolorous despair and well peppered with dread and confidence, cowardice and courage, rage and tranquillity; and further seasoned with every devilish doubt and celestial satisfaction that the heart of a writer is heir to.

In the morning he was certain of himself. He was the captain of his destiny; he was the dictator of his inspiration, equipped with the technical mastery that his obedient thoughts dare not disobey.

By afternoon the demon Doubt had shaken his self-confidence, and Fear peered at him between every line of his manuscript, and it was a case of Childe Roland from that time on until the pencil fell from his unnerved fingers and he rose from his work satiated, half-stunned, not knowing whether he had done well or meanly. Vaguely he realized at such moments that, for such as he, a just appraisal of his own work would never be possible for him—that he himself would never know; and that what men said of it—if, indeed, they ever said anything about his work—would never wholly convince him, never entirely enlighten him as to its value or its worthlessness.

That is one of the penalties imposed upon the creative mind. It goes on producing because it must. Praise stimulates it, blame depresses; but it never knows the truth. Toward the end of May, one afternoon, Stephanie came into his studio, seated herself calmly in his chair, and picked up his manuscript.

"It's no good," he said, throwing himself on an antique sofa which just endured the strain and no more.

She read for an hour, her grey eyes never leaving the written pages, her pretty brows bent inward with the strain of concentration.

He watched her, chin on hand, lying there on the sofa.

But the air was mild and languorous with the promise of the coming summer; sunshine fell across the wall; the boy dozed, presently, and after a while lay fast asleep.

She had been gone for some time when he awoke. As he sat up, blinking through the late afternoon sunshine, a pencilled sheet of yellow manuscript paper fluttered from his breast to the floor.

Jim, it is fine! I mean it! It is a splendid, virile, honest piece of work. And it is intensely interesting. I'm quite mad about it—quite thrilled that you can do such things. It's so masterly, so mature—and I don't know where you got your knowledge of that woman, because she is perfectly feminine and women think and do such things, and her motives are the motives that animate that sort of woman.

As you lie there asleep you look about eighteen—not much older than when I used to see you when you came home from school and lay on your sofa and read Kipling aloud to me. *Then* I was awed; you were a grown man to me. *Now* you are just a boy again, and I love you dearly, and I'm going to kiss your hair, very cautiously, before I go downstairs.

I've done it. I'm going now.

STEVE.

CHAPTER XXII

It happened one day late in May that Cleland, desiring local accuracy of detail in a chapter of his brand new novel, put on his hat and walked to Washington Square and across it, south, into the slums.

New leaves graced the trees in the park; spring flowers bloomed around the fountain, and the grass was rankly fragrant where it had just been mowed.

But he left the spring freshness behind him when he entered that sad, dingy, swarming region to the south, where the only clean creature seemed to be the occasional policeman in his new summer tunic, sauntering aloof amid the noise and wretchedness and the foul odours made fouler by the sunshine.

Cleland presently found the squalid street which he wished to describe in convincing detail, and stood there on the corner in the shelter of a tobacconist's awning making preliminary mental notes. Then, as he fished out note-book and pencil, intent on professional memoranda, he saw Grismer.

The man wore shabbier clothes than Cleland had ever before seen him wear; he was crossing the filthy street at his usual graceful and leisurely saunter, and he did not see Cleland under the awning.

There was a chop-suey restaurant opposite, a shabby, disreputable, odoriferous place, doubly repulsive in the pitiless sunshine. And into this sauntered Grismer and disappeared.

The slight shock of the episode remained to bother Cleland all the morning. He kept thinking of it while trying to work; he could not seem to put it from his mind and finally threw aside his manuscript, took his hat and stick, and went out with the intention of lunching.

It was nearly lunch time, but he did not walk toward the cream-coloured Hotel Rochambeau, with its green awnings and its French flag flying. He took the other way, scarcely realizing what he meant to do until he turned the corner into Bleeker Street.

He found the basement he was in search of presently; two steps down, an area gate and bell encrusted with rust, and a diseased and homeless cat dozing there in patient misery.

"You poor devil," he said, offering a cautious caress; but the gaunt creature struck at him and fled.

He rang. Jangling echoes resounded from within. Two negro wenches and a Chinaman surveyed him from adjoining houses. He could smell a sour stench from the beer saloon opposite, where a fat German beast was washing down the sidewalk with a mop.

"Hello, Cleland. This is very nice of you. Come in!" said a pleasant voice behind him, and, as he turned, Grismer, in shabby slippers and faded dressing-gown, opened the iron wicket.

"I hadn't called," said Cleland a little stiffly, "—so I thought I'd drop in for a moment and take you out somewhere to lunch."

Grismer smiled his curious, non-committal smile and ushered him into a big, whitewashed basement, with a screen barring the further end and quite bare except for a few bits of furniture, some plaster casts, and half a dozen revolving tables on which stood unfinished studies in clay and wax.

Cleland involuntarily glanced about him, then went over and politely examined the studies in clay.

"I've a back yard, too," said Grismer, "where I work in good weather. The light in here isn't particularly good."

For the wretchedness of his quarters he made no further apology; he spoke in his easy, amiable way and entirely without embarrassment, standing beside Cleland and moving with him from one study to another.

"They're just as clever as they can be," said Cleland, "—inferentially clever, Grismer. Are they commissions?"

"I'm sorry to say they are not," replied Grismer with a smile.

"But a man who can do this work ought never to want for commissions," insisted Cleland.

"I'm exceedingly glad you like my work," returned Grismer pleasantly, "but as for orders——" he shrugged—"when I didn't need them they came to me. But, Cleland, when the world learns that a man needs anything it suddenly discovers that it doesn't need him! Isn't it funny," he added good-humouredly, "that prosperous talent is always in demand, always turning down work which it has no time to do; but the same talent on its uppers is universally under deep suspicion?"

He spoke lightly, impersonally, and without the slightest trace of bitterness. "Sit down and light one of your own cigarettes," he said. "I've only pipe-tobacco, and you probably wouldn't care for it."

Cleland seated himself in the depths of a big, threadbare arm-chair.

Grismer said with a smile:

"No use informing you that I'm obliged to live economically. Models are expensive; so is material. Therefore, I live where I can afford both, and a roof to cover them.... And do you know, Cleland, that after all it doesn't matter much where one sleeps——" he made a slight gesture toward the screen at the end of the room. "I used to think it did until I had to give up a place of my own full of expensive and beautiful things.

"But it really doesn't matter. The main idea is to be free—free of debt, free of expensive impedimenta which cause one anxiety, free from the importunities and restrictions of one's friends." He laughed and dropped one long leg over the other.

"I've niggers and Chinamen for neighbours. They cause me no inconvenience. It's rather agreeable than otherwise to sit here and work, or lounge about and smoke, wondering whether a commission is already on its way or whether it has not yet even

taken shape in the brain of some person unknown who is destined by fate some day to exchange his money for my bronze or marble.... It's an amusing game, Cleland, isn't it?—the whole affair of living, I mean.... Not too unpleasant, not too agreeable.... But if one's heart-action were not involuntary and automatic, do you know, if it lay with me I'd not bother to keep my heart ticking—I'd be too lazy to wind it up."

He stretched himself out in his chair gracefully, good-humoured, serenely amused at his own ideas.

"Did you have a good time abroad?" he inquired.

"Yes.... When you get on your feet you ought to go to Paris, Grismer."

"Yes, I know." He looked humorously at his well-shaped feet stretched out before him in shabby slippers. "Yes; it's up to my feet, Cleland. But they're a wandering, indifferent couple, inclined to indolence, I fear.... Is your work getting on?"

"I'm busy.... Yes, I think it's taking shape."

He looked up at Grismer hesitatingly, frankly troubled. "Grismer, we were school-mates.... I wouldn't wish you to think me impertinent——"

"Go ahead, Cleland."

"Are you quite sure?"

"I'm sure of *you*," returned Grismer, with a singular smile. "I know you pretty well, Cleland. I knew you in school, in college.... We fought in school. You were civil to me at Harvard." He laughed. "I've always liked you, Cleland—which is more than you can say about me."

Cleland reddened, and Grismer laughed again, lightly and without effort:

"It's that way sometimes. I think that you are about the only man I have ever really liked. You didn't know that, did you?"

"No."

"Well, don't let it worry you," added Grismer, smiling. "Go on and say what you were about to say."

"It was—I was merely wondering—whether you'd take it all right if——" He began again from another angle: "I've a country place—up in the Berkshires—my father's old place. And I thought that a fountain—if you'd care to design one——"

Grismer had been watching him with that indefinable smile in his golden eyes, which perplexed men and interested women, but now he rose suddenly and walked to the barred windows and stood there with his back turned, gazing out into the area. After an interval he pivoted on his heels, sauntered back and seated himself, relighting his pipe.

"All right," he said very quietly. "I'll do your fountain."

Cleland drew a breath of relief. "If you like," he said, "come up with me to Runner's Rest in June and look over the garden. There ought to be a pool there; there are plenty of springs on the mountain to feed a fountain by gravity. I think it would be fine to have a pool and a fountain in the old garden. Is it understood that you'll do it for me?"

"Yes.... I don't wish to be paid."

"Good Lord! You and I are professionals, Grismer, not beastly amateurs. Do you think I'd write for anybody unless I'm paid for it?"

Grismer's eyes held a curious expression as they rested on him. Then his features changed and he smiled and nodded carelessly:

"I'll do your fountain on your own terms. Tell me when you are ready."

Cleland rose:

"Won't you change your mind and lunch with me somewhere?"

"Thanks, no." Grismer also had risen, and the two men confronted each other for a moment in silence.

Then Grismer said:

"Cleland, I think you're the only man in the world for whom I have any real consideration. I haven't much use for men—no delusions. But it always has been different about you—even when we fought in school—even when I used to sneer at you sometimes.... And I want, somehow, to make you understand that I wish you well; that if it lay with me you should attain *whatever* you wish in life; that if attainment depended upon my stepping aside I'd do it.... That's all I can say. Think it over and try to understand."

Cleland, astonished, looked at him with unconcealed embarrassment.

"You're very kind," he said, "to feel so generously interested in my success. I wish you success, too."

Grismer smiled:

"You *don't* understand me after all," he said pleasantly. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

"You are offering me your friendship, as I take it," said Cleland awkwardly. "Isn't that what you meant?"

"Yes. And other things...."

He laughed with a slight touch of malice in his mirth:

"There's such a lot yet left unsaid between you and me, which you and I must say to each other some day. But there's plenty of time, Cleland.... And I shall be very glad to design and execute a fountain for your garden."

He offered his hand; Cleland took it, the embarrassed flush still staining his face.

"Yes," he said, "there is a matter that I wish to talk over with you some day, Grismer."

"I know.... But I think we had better wait a while.... Because I wish to answer everything you ask; and for the present I had rather not."

They walked slowly to the area gate and Grismer unlocked it.

"I'm glad you came," he said. "It's a bit lonely sometimes.... I have no friends."

"When you feel that way," said Cleland, "drop in on me."

"Thanks."

And that was all. Cleland went away through the ill-smelling streets, crossed the sunny square, and walked thoughtfully back to his own studio.

"He's a strange man," he mused, "—he was a strange boy, and he's grown into a curious sort of man.... Poor devil.... It's as though something inside him is lacking—or has been killed.... But why in God's name did Steve marry him unless she was in love with him? ... It must be.... And his pride won't let him take her until he can stand on his own feet.... When I dig that pool I'll dig a pit for my feet.... A grave for a fool...."

He unlocked his studio and went in.

"I'm done with love," he said aloud to himself.

The jingle of the telephone bell echoed his words and he walked slowly over to the table and detached the receiver.

"Jim?"

"Is it you, Steve?"

"Yes. Would you like some tea about five?"

"All right. I've had no lunch and I'll be hungry."

"You know, Jim, I'm not going to provide a banquet for you. Why don't you go out and take lunch?"

"I forgot it. I don't feel like work. Shall I come down and talk to you now?"

"I'm going out to take a dancing lesson in a few moments. I'll talk to you while I'm putting on my hat."

He said "All right," took his hat and stick and went downstairs again.

She opened the door for him, offering him her cool, slim hand, then she opened a hat-box and lifted from it a hat.

"I believe I'll join the Russian ballet," she said. "I do dance very nicely. You should hear what the ballet master says. And Miss Duncan and Miss St. Denis watched me yesterday, and they were very complimentary and polite."

"Nonsense. It's good exercise, but it would be a dog's life for you to lead, Steve. Where is Helen?"

"Out hunting a model for her Pegasus. She asked me to pose for the mounted figure, but I haven't time. I can fancy myself, in a complete state of nature, scrambling onto some rickety old livery hack——" She threw back her head and laughed, then inspected her new hat, and, facing the studio mirror, pinned it to her chestnut hair.

"Do you like it, Jim?"

"Fine. You make all hats look well."

"Such a nice, polite boy! So well brought up! But unfortunately I heard you say the same thing to Helen.... Where have you been, Jim? I called you up an hour ago."

"I went to see Grismer," he said, coolly ignoring her perverse and tormenting humour.

"You did? Bless your dear, generous heart!" cried the girl. "Do you know that if it were in me to be sentimental over you, what you did would start me? Continue to

behave like a real man, dear friend, and I'll be head over heels in love before I know it!"

"Why?" he asked, conscious again of her gaily derisive mood and not caring for it.

"Because," she said, "you have acted like a man in calling on Oswald, and not like a spoiled boy. You resented Oswald's marrying me. You have been sullen and suspicious and aloof with him since you came back. I know Oswald better than you do. I know that he has felt your attitude keenly, though he never admitted it even to me.

"He is a man of few friends, admired but not well liked; he is wretchedly poor, fiercely proud, sensitive——"

"What!"

"Did you think he wasn't?" she asked. "He is painfully sensitive; pitifully so. I think women divine it, and it attracts them."

"He hasn't the reputation of being very thin-skinned," remarked Cleland drily.

"The average man who is sensitive would die to conceal it. You ought to know that, Jim; it's your business to dissect people, isn't it?"

She thrust a second pin through the crown of her hat and adjusted it deftly.

"Anyway," she said, "you are a nice, polite boy to go to see him, and you have made me very happy. Good-bye! I must run——"

"Have you lunched?"

"No, but I'm going to."

"With whom?" he asked incautiously.

"A man."

"You're usually just going out to lunch or dine with some man," he said sullenly.

"I like men," she said, smiling at him.

"What you probably mean is that you like admiration."

"I do. It's agreeable; it's sanitary; it's soothing. It invigorates one's self-confidence and self-respect. And it doesn't disarrange one's hair and rumple one's gown. Therefore, I prefer the undemonstrative admiration of a man to the indiscreet demonstrations of a boy."

"Do you mean me?" he asked, furious.

But she ignored the question:

"Boys *are* funny," she said, swinging her velvet reticule in circles. "Any girl can upset their equilibrium. All a girl has to do is to look at a boy sideways—the way Lady Button-eyes looked at you yesterday afternoon——"

"What!"

"At the Rochambeau. And you got up and went over and renewed your friendship with her. Helen and I saw you."

"I was merely civil," he said.

"So was she. She fished out a card and wrote on it. *I* don't know what she wrote."

"She wrote her telephone call. There isn't the slightest chance of my using it."

Stephanie laughed:

"He certainly is the nicest, politest boy in all Manhattan, and sister is very, very proud of him. *Good-bye*, James——"

She offered her lips to him audaciously, bending forward on tip-toe, both hands clasped behind her. But her grey eyes were bright with malice.

"Nice, polite boy," she repeated. "Kiss little sister."

"No," he said gloomily, "I'm fed up on sisterly kisses——"

"You insulting wretch! Do you mean you *won't*? Then you *shall*——!"

She started toward him, wrath in her eyes, but he caught her wrists and held her.

"You're altogether too well satisfied with yourself," he said. "You've no emotions inside your very lovely person except discreet ones. Otherwise, you've got the devil inside you and it's getting on my nerves."

"Jim! You beast!"

"Yes, I am. What of it? Beasts have emotions. Yours have either been cultivated out of you or you were born without any. I'm glad I am part beast. I'm glad you know it. The rest of me is human; and the combination isn't a very serious menace to civilization. But the sort of expurgated girl you are is!"

"Don't you think I'm capable of any deep emotions?" she asked. The smile had died on her lips.

"Maybe. I don't know."

"Who should, if you don't?"

He shrugged:

"Your husband, perhaps."

"Jim! I told you not to call him that!"

"Well, a spade is a spade——"

"Do you mean to be offensive?"

"How can that offend you?"

She released her wrists and shot a curious, inexplicable look at him.

"I don't understand you," she said. "You can be so generous and high-minded and you can be so unkind and insolent to me."

"Insolent?"

"Yes. You meant it insolently when you spoke of Oswald as my husband. You've done it before, too. Why do you? Do you really want to hurt me? Because you know he isn't my husband except by title. He may never be."

"All right," he said. "I'm sorry I was offensive. I'm just tired of this mystery, I suppose. It's a hopeless sort of affair for me. I can't make you love me; you're married, besides. It's too much for me—I can't cope with it, Steve.... So I won't ever bother you again with importunities. I'll go my own way."

"Very well," she said in an even voice.

She nodded to him and went out, saying as she passed:

"There'll be tea at five, if you care for any." And left him planted.

Which presently enraged him, and he began to pace the studio, pondering on the cruelty, insensibility and injustice of that devilish sex which had created man as a convenience.

"The thing to do," he said savagely to himself, "is to exterminate the last trace of love for her, tear it out, uproot it, trample on it without remorse——"

The studio bell rang. He walked to the door and opened it. A bewilderingly pretty girl stood there.

"Miss Davis?" she inquired sweetly. "I have an appointment."

"Come in," said Cleland, the flush of wrath still on his countenance.

The girl entered; he offered her a chair.

"Miss Davis happens to be out at the moment," he said, "but I don't believe she'll be very long."

"Do you mind my waiting?" asked the pretty girl.

"No, I don't," he said, welcoming diversion. "Do you mind my being here? Or are you going to put me out?"

She looked surprised, then she laughed very delightfully:

"Of course not. Miss Davis and I have known each other for a long while, and I owe her a great deal and I am devoted to her. Do you think I'd be likely to banish a friend of hers? Besides, I'm only one of her models."

"A model?" he repeated. "How delightful! I also am a model—of good behaviour."

They both laughed.

"Does it pay?" she inquired mischievously.

"No, it doesn't. I wish I had another job."

"Why not take the one I've just left?"

"What was it?"

"I was dancing at the Follies."

"All right. Will you try me out?"

"With pleasure."

"I'll turn on that music-box."

The girl laughed her enchanting little laugh, appraised him at a glance, then turned her pretty head and critically surveyed the studio.

"I believe," she said, "I'm to pose for Miss Davis seated on a winged horse. Isn't that exciting?"

"You'd be delightful on a winged horse," he said.

"Do you think so?"

"I suspect it. What did you do in the Follies?"

"Nothing very interesting. Have you seen the Follies?"

"You ought to know I haven't," he said reproachfully. "Do you suppose I could have forgotten you?"

She rose and dropped him a Florodora curtsey. They were getting on very well. She glanced demurely at the music box. He jumped up and turned it on. The battered disc croaked out a tango.

"Shall I take up those rugs?" he inquired.

"What on earth would Miss Davis say if she found us dancing?"

"She isn't here to say anything. *Shall I?*"

"Very well.... I'll help you."

They dragged the rugs aside.

The studio was all golden with the sun, now, and the brilliant rays bathed them as she laid her gloved hand in his and his arm encircled her waist.

She was a wonderful dancer; her supple grace and professional perfection enchanted him.

From time to time he left her to crank up the music-box; neither of them tired. Occasionally she glanced at her jewelled wrist-watch and ventured to voice her doubts as to the propriety of continuing in the imminence of Miss Davis's return.

"Then let's come up to my studio," he said. "I've a music-phone of sorts. We can dance there until you're tired, and then you can come down and see Miss Davis."

She demurred: the music-box ran down with a squawk.

"Shall we take one more chance here?" he asked.

"No, it's too risky.... Shall I run up to your place for just one little dance?"

"Come on!" he said, taking her hand.

They went out and he closed the door. Then, hand-in-hand, laughing like a pair of children, they sped up the stairs and arrived breathless before his door, which he unlocked. And in another minute they were dancing again while a scratched record croaked out a fox-trot.

"I *must* go," she said, resting one gloved hand on his arm. "I'd love to stay but I mustn't."

"First," he said, "we'll have tea."

"No!"

But presently they were seated on his desk, a plate of sweet biscuits between them, their glasses of sherry touching.

"Unknown but fascinating girl," he said gaily, "I drink to your health and fortune. Never shall I forget our dance together; never shall I forget the charming stranger who took tea with me!"

"Nor shall I forget you!—you very nice boy," she said, looking at him with smiling intentness.

"Would it spoil if we saw each other again?"

"You know that such delightful encounters never bear repetition," she answered. "Now I'm going. Farewell!"

She laughed at him, touched her glass with her lips, set it aside, and slipped to the floor.

"Good-bye!" she said. He caught her at the door, and she turned and looked up gravely.

"Don't spoil it," she whispered, disengaging herself.

So he released her, and she stretched out her hand, smiled at him, and stepped out. The music-phone continued to play gaily.

A girl who was coming upstairs saw her as she left Cleland's studio; and, as the pretty visitor sped lightly past her, the girl who was mounting turned and watched her. Then she resumed her ascent, came slowly to Cleland's open door, stood there resting a moment as though out of breath.

Cleland, replacing the rugs, glanced up and caught sight of Stephanie; and the quick blood burnt his face.

She came in as though still a trifle weary from the ascent. Neither spoke. She glanced down at the two empty wine glasses on his desk, saw the decanter, the biscuits and cigarettes. The music-phone was expiring raucously.

"Who is that girl?" she asked in an even, colourless voice.

"A girl I met."

"Do you mind telling me her name?"

"I—don't know it," he said, getting redder.

"Oh. Shall I enlighten you?"

"Thank you."

"She's Mary Cliff, of the Follies. I've seen her dance."

"Really," he said carelessly.

Stephanie leaned against the desk, resting one hand on it. An odd sense of mental fatigue possessed her; things were not clear in her mind; she was not very sure of what she was saying:

"I came up to say—that I'm sorry we quarrelled.... I'm sorry now that I came. I'm going in a moment.... You've already had tea, I see. So you won't care for any more."

After a flushed silence, he said:

"Did you have a successful lesson, Steve?"

"I've had two—lessons. Yes, they were quite—successful."

"You seem tired."

"No." She turned and walked to the door. He opened it for her in silence.

"Good night," she said.

"Good night."

CHAPTER XXIII

Cleland's unhappy interpretation of the episode was masculine and therefore erroneous—the interpretation of a very young man whose reverence for the restless sex might require revision some day or other unless he died exceedingly young. For he concluded, now, that he had thoroughly disgusted Stephanie Quest; first by his vulgar flirtation with Lady Button-eyes, then by losing his temper and admitting to her his own odious materialism; and, furthermore and flagrantly, by his hideous behaviour with a pretty girl whose name even he had not known when he entertained her at his impromptu *thé-dansant*.

He saw himself quite ruined in the unemotional grey eyes of a girl who, herself, was so coldly aloof from the ignoble emotions lurking ever and furtively in the masculine animal.

He had had little enough chance with Stephanie, even when his conduct had been exemplary. Now he was dreadfully certain that his chances were less than none at all; that he had done himself in. What had he to hope of her now?

To this unconventional yet proud, pure-hearted girl had been offered the very horrid spectacle of his own bad temper and reprehensible behaviour. And, although there had been no actual harm in it, *she* could never, never understand or forgive it. Never!

Her virginal ears had been insulted by the cynical avowal of his own masculine materialism. Of the earth, earthy, he had vaunted himself in his momentary exasperation—"of humanity, a shamelessly human example."

With her own incredulous, uncontaminated eyes she had seen him pocket Lady Button-eye's telephone number. Her shrinking ears had heard the mutilated record in his music-phone dying out in a tipsy two-step; her outraged gaze had beheld a perfectly strange young girl's gaily informal exit from his own bachelor apartment, where sherry still stood in both glasses and the rugs lay scattered in disorder against the wall. Elimination was naturally the portion he had to expect. And he gloomily schooled himself to endure annihilation.

According to his philosophy there was nothing else on earth to do about it. Doubtless she'd ultimately forgive him, but her respect he couldn't hope for at present; and as for any deeper sentiment, if ever there had been any hope in his heart that he might one day awaken it, now he knew it was wriggling in its death-throes, making him, by turns, either frightfully unhappy or resentfully reckless.

The hopeless part of it was that, unlike weaker men, he had no desire to drown sorrow in any irregular and unworthy fashion.

Many men of many minds turn to many things seeking the anodyne in one form or another—the *nepenthe* of forgetfulness, rarer than the philosopher's stone.

Neither wine nor the dreary quest for heart-ease among frailer companions ever appeals to any but weak minds. And the boy, not knowing what to do, turned to his work with a renewed energy resembling desperation.

It is the only hope for ultimate anesthesia.

Also, he took to prowling by night, being too unhappy to remain in his studio so near to Stephanie.

He prowled about Broadway and Long Acre with Badger Spink, whose restless cleverness and self-absorption ended by wearying him; he prowled with Clarence Verne one night, encountering that strange sphinx by accident, and strolling with him at hazard through the purlieus of Chelsea. Both men seemed deeply preoccupied with problems of their own, and though they knew each other only slightly they maintained the reticence of intimacy—an odd assumption, as Cleland thought afterward. Yet, one of them was very sick for love, and the other very sick of it; and, besides, there roved with them a third and unseen companion, through the crooked, lamp-lit streets, whose shrouded arm was linked in Verne's. And perhaps that accounted for the sombre silence which brooded between these men in trouble.

Verne said at parting—and gazing absently at nothing while he spoke:

"The tragedy of civilization—of what the world calls civilization!—that is the most terrible of all, Cleland. That is the real and only hell. Not the ruthless eruptions of barbarism; not the momentary resurgence of atavistic violence—of red-blooded rapine and lust—but the ordered, lawful, stealthy, subtle horrors of civilization: they slay men's souls."

"I don't get you, Verne."

"No, Cleland. But somebody else will—somebody else will get me—very soon, now.... Good-bye."

A few days later Cleland prowled with Harry Belter, intent upon supper somewhere in the outer marches of the town.

For an episode had occurred that shook them both with the most sobering and distressing jar that youth experiences in fullest mental and physical vigour.

"I *don't* see how a man can kill himself," said Cleland. "I don't see why he can't go somewhere else and cure himself of his unhappiness. Travel, change, new faces—"

"Perhaps he wants to be rid of faces," muttered Belter.

"There are wonderful wildernesses."

"Perhaps he's too tired to admire 'em. Perhaps he's half dead for sleep."

"You talk as though you sympathized and understood, Harry."

"I do."

"*You!* The indefatigable optimist! You, the ever-welcome, the gay consoler, the irrepressible spirit among us!"

"If I didn't play that rôle I'd do what Clarence Verne did!"

"*What!*"

"Long ago," added Belter.

"For God's sake, why? I never dreamed——"

"You were away, three years, having a good time abroad, weren't you? How should you know what happened to others?"

"Did something happen to you, Harry?"

"It did. If you wish to know exactly what, I'll tell you what happened to me was a woman. Now you know something that nobody else knows—except that demon and myself."

"But such things——"

"No. Such things destroy, ultimately. I'll die of her, one day."

"Nonsense!"

But Belter, the jester, laughed a terrifying laugh and sauntered into the open door of the restaurant which they had walked a mile or two to find.

"It's a low pub," he remarked, "and suitable to my mind." They seated themselves at a cherry table. One or two newspaper men nodded to Belter. A confidence man, whispering to a painted mulatto girl, turned to scrutinize him; a ruffianly bar-keeper saluted him cordially.

There was a grill glowing beyond the bar. A waiter, chewing a tooth-pick, came up and stood leaning on their table with both hairy hands spread flat on the polished top.

"Well, gents, what is it?" he asked hoarsely.

They gave their order. Then Belter, leaning forward and planting both elbows on the table, said in a low voice:

"They call me a caricaturist, but, by God, Cleland, I'm a realist! I've learned more about women by caricaturing them than I ever read in their smooth countenances. They *are* caricatures, in their secret souls—every one of them; and when I exaggerate a weak point and ignore everything but the essential character lines and contours, by jingo, Cleland, I've discovered 'em—exposed 'em as they really are!—distorted caricatures of human beings."

Cleland disagreed with him, gloomily, amazed at his bitterness.

"No," said Belter, "if you tell the mere truth about them they're a nuisance! We don't understand 'em. Why? There's very little to understand and that's all on the surface as plain as the nose on your face!—too plain for us to notice. And you writers explore and dissect 'em, seeking deeps where there are shallows, mysteries where there are facts, subtleties where everything is obvious. They haven't much mind, they have few traits because they have precious little character. They are not like humans; they resemble Fabre's insects—strange, incomprehensible Martians, doing things not from intelligence, not from reason, impulse, desire, but merely from an inherited instinct that apes intelligence, that parodies passion."

"What *have* they done to you, Harry?"

"Nothing, in years.... Because I won't let 'em. But the spectacle of the world suddenly crawling with women, all swarming restlessly over the face of the globe, not knowing why or whither—it appalls me, Jim. And we men continue flinging at them everything we can think of to stop them, quiet them, and keep them still—personal liberty, franchise, political opportunity, professional and industrial chances—and still they twist and wriggle and squirm and swarm over everything restlessly, slowly becoming denatured, unsexed, more sterile, more selfish, insolent, intolerable every day. They are the universal nuisance of the age; they are slowly smothering us as shifting dunes threaten the fertile plain——"

"For heaven's sake——"

"There's the unvarnished truth about woman," insisted Belter. "She's got the provocative *câlinerie* of a cat; the casual insouciance of a sparrow; the nesting and hatching instinct of the hen; the mindless jealousy of a Pekingese.

"The creative mind that marries one of 'em is doomed either to sterility or to anguish. Their jealousy and malice stultify and slay the male brain; there is no arguing with them because they have no real mind to appeal to, no logic, no reason. Like the horrible praying Mantis they suffer the embrace of the male and immediately begin to eat him, commencing with the head——"

Cleland began to laugh. His mirth, unrestrained, did not disturb Belter, who continued to eat his club sandwich and wash it down with huge draughts of Pilsner.

"Do you think I'd marry one of 'em?" he demanded scornfully. "Do you know what really happened to Clarence Verne?"

"No."

"Well, he married a dainty little thing and expected to continue earning two thousand dollars for every magazine cover he designed. And do you know what happened?"

"No, I don't."

"I'll tell you. The dainty little thing turned jealous, hired a shyster who hired detectives to follow Verne about and report to her what he did inside and outside his studio. She doped his food when she thought he had a rendezvous; she had his letters stolen. In his own world, any woman he found agreeable was cut out by his wife; if, in the jolly and unconventional fellowship of Bohemia, he ever stopped on the street to chat with a pretty girl or took one, harmlessly, to lunch or supper, or offered any of 'em tea in his studio, her detectives reported it to her and she raised hell.

"It killed spontaneity, any gaiety of heart, any incentive in Verne. It embittered him, aged him, strangled him. Look at his work to-day! Nothing remains except the mechanical technique. Look at the man. Dead in his bathroom. Don't talk to me about women."

"Why didn't he divorce her if he knew of all this she was doing?"

"He had a little girl to think of. After all, Verne had lived his life. Better snuff it out that way and leave the child in decent ignorance of family dissension.... And that

was the matter with Clarence Verne, Cleland. And I tell you that into the heart of every man who has been fool enough to marry, some canker is eating its way. There is not one woman in a million with mind enough and humanity enough to keep her husband's love—not one who knows enough to

'Let him alone

And he'll come home—'

Not one with the brains, mental resource, wisdom, to mate without becoming a parasite. And still, all over the world the asses are solemnly asking each other, 'Is marriage a failure?' Bah! The world makes me very sick!"

They went to Verne's funeral a few days later. The widow was very pretty in her deep mourning. Her little girl was with her.

But the affair was not even a nine-days' gossip in the artists' world. Verne had stalked wistfully among them for a few years, but had never been of them since his marriage: he had lived at home in one of the fashionable quarters, although his studio—and his heart—were in Chelsea.

So his well-known magazine covers were missed more than he was, and people soon ceased discussing him and his fate; and in a month nobody remembered whether it had been done with a razor or a revolver. And very few cared.

As for Cleland, he had never known Verne well, and the damnation of his taking off affected him only superficially. Besides, busy men have little time to bother about death; and Cleland was now extremely busy with his novel, which began to take definite shape and proportion under unremitting labour.

He now saw Stephanie much as usual; and the girl did not seem seriously changed toward him in behaviour. Her spirits appeared to be high always; she seemed to be always doing something interesting and delightful, dining out, going to theatres—though the choice was now limited, as many were already closed for the summer—motoring out to the country, taking her dancing and dramatic lessons, entertaining in the studio.

It is true that he seldom or never saw Stephanie alone now, but that seemed accidental, because he really had been absorbed in his work and she was usually out somewhere or other during the day. But she appeared to be cordial to him—just as full of gay malice and light banter as ever—full of undisguised interest in the progress of his work and delighted with his promise to let her read the manuscript when it was typed and before he submitted it to any publisher.

So all seemed to go serenely between them; he resolutely told himself that he had given her up; she did not appear to be aware of anything altered or subdued in his cordiality toward her—apparently missed nothing in his attitude that might once have been to her significant of any deeper feeling.

Yet, once or twice, when a gay company filled her studio, amid the chatter and music and movement of dancers, he became aware of her level, grey eyes gravely intent on him—but always the gravity he surprised in them turned to a quick, frank

smile when his gaze encountered hers, and she always made him some pretty signal of recognition across the animated scene.

As for Helen, he always got on delightfully with that charming and capable girl. There was something very engaging about her, she was so wholesome, so energetic, so busy, so agreeable to look at.

He had acquired a habit of dropping in on his way out to lunch to watch her working on the sketches and studies for "Aspiration;" but one day she forgot to warn him and he blundered into the courtyard where, on a white circus-horse, a lovely, slender, but rather startling figure hid its face in its hands and desperately attempted to make a garment of its loosened hair, while an elderly female holding the horse's head cried "Shoo!" and Helen hustled him out, a little perturbed and intensely amused.

"I ought to have told you," she said. "I wouldn't mind, but even professional models object to anybody except, occasionally, another artist."

"I'm sorry," he said. "Please tell little Miss Eve that I didn't mean to scare her."

They chatted for a few minutes, then Helen smilingly excused herself and went back to her work, and Cleland continued on his way to lunch, chagrined at his stupidity.

"I wonder," he thought, "if that was my little unknown dancing partner? Now, she will think I've 'spoiled it all.'"

He was in masculine error again. Disconcerted beauty has the consolation that it is beautiful. Otherwise, it remains merely outraged modesty; and bitterness abides in its soul.

Helen, laughingly mentioning the affair to Stephanie, still immensely amused at Cleland's distress and apologetic blushes, added that the model, Marie Cliff, had been sensible enough to appreciate the humour of it, too.

"You mean," said Stephanie, coldly, "that she didn't care." And, not smiling, went on with her sewing.

"She's rather a refined type," said Helen, looking curiously at the girl who, bent over her mending, was plying her needle furiously.

Stephanie shrugged.

"Don't you think so, Steve?"

"No. I think her typically common."

"How odd! She's quite young, and she's really very nice and modest—not the type of person you seem to imagine——"

"I don't *like* her," interrupted Stephanie calmly. But her slender fingers were flying, and she had set her teeth in her under lip, which had trembled a little.

Helen, chancing to mention Cleland that night as they were preparing for bed, was astonished at Stephanie's impatient comment:

"Oh, Jim's quite spoiled. I'm rapidly losing interest in that young man."

"Why?" asked Helen, surprised.

"Because he runs about with queer people. No man can do that and not show it in his own manner."

"What people, Steve?"

"Well, with Lady Button-eyes for one. With your modest and bashful little model, for another."

"Does he?" Then she began to laugh. "I'm glad he displays good taste, anyway! The little Cliff girl is charming."

"Isn't that rather a horrid and cynical thing to say?" demanded Stephanie, flushing brightly.

"Why? I think she's quite all right. Let them play together if they like. It's none of my business. Are you, the high-priestess of tolerance, becoming intolerant?" she added laughingly.

"No. I don't care what he does. But I should think he'd prefer to frivel with one of his own class."

"It's a matter of chance," remarked Helen, brushing out her curly brown hair. "The beggar-maid or Vere-de-Vere—it's all the same to a man if the girl is sufficiently attractive and amusing."

"Amusing?" repeated Stephanie. "That is a humiliating rôle—to amuse a man."

"If a girl doesn't, men soon neglect her. Men go where they are amused. Everybody does. You do. I do. Why not?"

Stephanie, still hotly flushed, shook out her beautiful chestnut hair and began to comb it viciously.

"I don't see how a common person can amuse a well-born man," she said.

"It's a reflection on us if we give them the opportunity," retorted Helen, laughing. "But if we're not clever enough to hold the men of our own caste, then they'll certainly go elsewhere for their amusement."

"And good riddance!"

"But who's to replace them?"

"I can get along perfectly without men."

"Steve, you're talking like a child! What happens to be the matter with you? Has anything gone wrong?"

"Absolutely nothing——" She turned sharply; her comb caught in her hair and she jerked it free. Perhaps that accounted for the sudden glint of tears in her grey eyes.

Helen slipped her arm around her, but the girl's rigid body did not yield and she kept her head obstinately averted.

"Are you getting tired of your idiotic bargain with Oswald?" asked Helen, gently.

"No, I am not! *He* never bothers me—never gets on my nerves—never is unjust—unkind——"

"Who is?"

"I don't know.... Men in general—annoy me—men in—general."

"None in particular?"

"No.... It isn't very agreeable to know that one's brother goes about with a shameless dancer from the Follies."

"Are you sure he does?"

"Perfectly. He gives her a party in his studio, too, sometimes."

"But there's no harm in——"

"A party for *two*! They drink—together."

"Oh."

"They drink and dance and eat, all by themselves! They take up the rugs and turn on the music and—and I don't know what they do!—I—d-don't know—I don't—I don't——!"

Her head fell into her hands; she stood rigid, her body shaken by emotions too unhappy, too new, too vague for her youthful analysis.

"I—I can't bear to think of him that way——" she stammered, "—he was so straight and clean—so clean——"

"Some men drift a little—sometimes——"

"They say so.... I don't know. I am too miserable about him—too unhappy——"

She choked back a sob, and the slender hands that covered her eyes slowly clenched.

Helen looked at her in consternation. Girls don't usually betray so much emotion over some casual irregularity of a brother.

Stephanie pressed her clenched hands mutely against her lids for a while, then, her lips still quivering, she reached for her brush and began to groom her splendid hair again.

And Helen, watching her without a word, thought to self:

"She behaves as though she were falling in love with him.... She'd certainly better be careful. The boy is already in love with her, no matter how he acts.... If she isn't very, very careful she'll get into trouble with him."

Aloud she said cheerfully:

"Steve, dear, I really think I'm clever enough to have taken the measure of your very delightful brother. And I honestly don't believe it is in him to play fast and loose with any woman ever born."

"He *is* doing it!"

"With whom?"

"That—Dancing girl——"

"Nonsense! If it's an ephemeral romance, which I don't believe, it's a gay and harmless one. Don't worry your pretty head about it, Steve."

After Stephanie was in bed she kissed her lightly, smiled reassuringly, switched off the light and went to her own room, slowly.

Very gravely she braided her hair before the mirror, looking at her pale, reflected face.

Yet, though pale, it was still a fresh, wholesome, beautiful face. But the brown eyes stared sadly at their twin brown images, and the girl shook her head.

For the nearest that Helen Davis had ever come to falling in love was when Cleland first walked into her studio. She could have fallen in love with him then—within the minute—out of a clear sky. She realized it after he had gone—not too deeply astonished—she, who had never before been in love, recognized its possibility all in a moment.

But she had learned to hold herself in check since that first, abrupt and clear-minded recognition of such a possibility.

Never by a word or glance had she ever betrayed herself; yet his very nearness to her, at times, set her heart beating, set a faint thrill stealing through her. Yet her eyes always met his pleasantly, frankly, steadily; her hand lay calm and cool in his when she welcomed him or bade him good-bye. Always she schooled herself to withstand what threatened her, gave it no food for reflection, no sustenance, no status, no consideration.

Love came as no friend to her. She soon realized that. And she quietly faced him and bade him keep his distance.

She looked at herself again in the glass. Her brown eyes were very, very serious. Then the smile glimmered.

"Quand même," she murmured gaily, and switched off the light.

CHAPTER XXIV

It was a warm day in early June and Cleland, working in trousers and undershirt, and driven by thirst to his tin ice-box, discovered it to be empty.

"Confound it," he muttered, and rang up Stephanie's studio. A maid answered, saying that Miss Quest had gone motoring and Miss Davis had not yet returned from shopping.

"I want to borrow a lump of ice," explained Cleland. "I'll come down for it."

So he concealed his lack of apparel under a gay silk dressing gown, picked up a pan, and went down, not expecting to encounter anybody.

In the kitchenette, in the rear, the obliging maid gave him a lump of ice. Carrying it in one hand, aloft, as an expert waiter carries a towering tray of dishes, and whistling a gay air with great content—for his work upstairs had gone very well that morning—he sauntered out of the culinary regions, along the alley-like passageway, into the studio.

And as he started for the door which he had left ajar, a figure opened it from without and entered hurriedly—a scared, breathless little figure, bare-footed, swathed in a kimono and a shock of hair.

They stared at each other, astonished. Both blushed furiously.

"I simply can't help it," said the girl. "I was sitting on that horse waiting for Miss Davis, when a bee or a horsefly or something stung him and he began to rear and kick all around the court, and I slid off him and ran."

They both laughed. Cleland, clutching his pan of ice, said:

"I seem doomed to run into you when I shouldn't. I'm terribly sorry."

She blushed again and carefully swathed her waist in the obi.

"You didn't mean to," she said. "It was rather startling, though."

"It was, indeed. And now we're having another unconventional party. Shall I leave this ice here and go out and quiet the nag?"

"He'll surely kick you."

"I'll take a chance——" He set the pan of ice on a table, girded up his dressing-gown, and went out into the court. The horse stood quietly enough now. But Cleland soon discovered a green-eyed horsefly squatting on the wall and rubbing its forelegs together in devilish exultation.

"I'll fix you," he muttered, picking up a lump of wet clay and approaching with infinite caution. He was a good shot; he buried the bloodthirsty little demon under a spatter of clay. Then he went back for his ice.

"The deed is done," he said cheerily. "It was a horsefly, as you said.... Good-bye.... When are we going to have another dance?"

"We'd better not," she said smilingly. She had seated herself on the sofa and had drawn her pretty, bare feet up under her kimono.

"You won't let me give another party for you?" he inquired.

"I ought not to."

"But *will* you?"

"I don't know. This kimono party we're having now seems sufficient for the present; and I think you'd better go."

"Anyway," he said, "when a desire for innocent revelling seizes you, you know where to go."

"Yes, thank you."

They laughed at each other.

"Good-bye, pretty stranger," he said.

"Good-bye, you nice boy!"

So he went away upstairs with his ice, and she stole out presently and ventured into the courtyard where the placid white horse stood as calmly as a cow.

And Stephanie, lying on her bed in her own room, twisted her body in anguish and, hands clenched, buried her face in her arms.

Helen, returning an hour later, and glancing into Stephanie's bed-room as she passed, saw the girl lying there.

"I thought you were motoring!" she exclaimed.

"The car is laid up," said Stephanie, in a muffled voice.

"Oh. Don't you feel well, Steve?"

"N-not very."

"Can I do anything? Wait a moment——" She continued on to her bed-room, unpinned her hat, drew on her working smock, and came slowly back, buttoning it.

"What's wrong, Steve?" she inquired.

"Nothing," said the girl, drearily. "I'm just—tired."

"Why—you've been crying!" murmured Helen, bending over her. "What is making you so unhappy, Steve? Don't you wish to tell me?"

"N-no."

"Shall I sit here by you, dear? I can work this afternoon——"

"No.... It's nothing at all—truly it isn't."

"Had you rather be alone?"

"Yes."

Helen went slowly away toward the court where her nag and its rider were ready for her. Stephanie lay motionless, dumb, wretched, her bosom throbbing with emotions too powerful for her—yet too vague, too blind, to enlighten her.

Unawakened to passion, ignorant of it, regardless and disdainful of what she had never coped with, the mental and spiritual suffering was, perhaps, the keener.

Humiliation and grief that she was no longer first and alone in Cleland's heart and mind had grown into a sorrow deeper than she knew, deeper than she admitted to herself. All the childish and pettier emotions attended it, mocking her with her own frailty—ignoble jealousy, hard resentment, the primitive sarcasm born of envy—the

white flash of hatred for those to whom this man turned for amusement—this man whom she had adored from boyhood.

Why had he cast her out of the first place in his heart and mind? He had even told her that he was in love with her. Why had he turned to this shameless dancer?

And to what others did he also turn to find amusement when she did not know where he was?

Had it been her fault? No. From the very first night that he had come back to her—in the very face of her happiness to have him again—he had shown her what kind of man he was—there at the Ball of All the Gods—with that dreadful Goddess of Night.

She turned feverishly, tortured by her thoughts, but neither they nor the hot pillow gave her any rest. They stung her like scorpions, setting every nerve on edge with something—anger, perhaps—something unendurable there in the silence of her room.

And at last she got up to make an end of it, once and for all. But the preparations took her some time—some cold water, brush and comb, and a chamois rag.

Cleland, now dressed for luncheon, humming a comic song under his breath and contentedly numbering his latest pencilled pages, heard the tap at his open door, and looked up cheerfully, hoping for Marie Cliff, a pre-prandial dance, and a pretty companion at luncheon. Tragedy entered, wearing the mask of Stephanie Quest.

"Hello!" he cried gaily, jumping up and coming toward her. "This is too delightful. Are you coming out to lunch with me, Steve?"

"Sit down a moment," she said. But he continued to stand; and she came over and stood beside his desk, resting one hand on it.

And, after a moment, lifting her grey eyes to his:

"I have borne a great deal from you. But there is an insult which you have offered me to-day that I shall not endure in silence."

"What insult?" he demanded, turning red.

"Making my studio a rendezvous for you and your—mistress!"

He knew what she meant instantly, and his wrath blazed:

"It was an accident. I don't know how you heard of it, but it was pure accident. Also, that is a rotten thing to say——"

"Is it! You once told me that you prefer to call a spade a spade! Oh, Jim!—you were *clean* once. What have you done!"

"But it's a lie—and an absurd one!"

"Do you think that of me, too—that I tell lies?"

"No. But you evidently believe one."

"It is too obvious to doubt——" Her throat was dry with the fierceness of her emotions and she choked a moment.

"Who told you?"

"I was there."

"Where?"

"In my bed-room. I had not gone out. I heard the maid tell you I was out motoring. I meant to speak to you—but you have been so—so unfriendly lately.... And then that woman came in!" ... Her grey eyes fairly blazed.

"Why do you do this to me?" she cried, clenching both hands. "It is wicked!—unthinkable! Why do you hold me in such contempt?"

Her fierce anger silenced him, and his silence lashed her until she lost her head.

"Do you think you can offer me such an affront in my own studio because I am really not your sister?—because your name is Cleland and mine is not?—because I was only the wretched, starved, maltreated child of drunken parents when your father picked me out of the gutter! Is that why you feel at liberty to affront me under my own roof—show your contempt for me? *Is it?*"

"Steve, you are mad!" he said. He had turned very white.

"No," she said, "but I'm at the limit of endurance. I can't stand it any longer. I shall go to-night to the man I married and live with him and find a shelter there—find protection and—f-forgetfulness——" Her voice broke but her eyes were the more brilliant and dangerous for the flashing tears:

"I know what you and my aunt talked over between you," she said. "You discussed the chances of my developing erratic, unscrupulous, morbid, immoral traits! You were anxious for fear I had inherited them. Probably now you think I have. Think as you please——!" she flashed out through her tears; "you have killed every bit of happiness in me. Remember it some day!"

She turned to go, and he sprang forward to detain her, but she twisted herself out of his arms and reeled back against the desk.

Then he had her in his arms again, and she stared at his white, tense face, all distorted by her blinding tears:

"I love you, Steve! That's all the answer I give you. That's my reply to your folly. I never loved anybody else; I never shall; I never can. I am clean. I don't know how it happens, but I *am*! They lie who tell you anything else. I'm like my father; I care for only one woman. I'm incapable of caring for any other.

"I don't know what I've done to you to make you say such things and think them. I consider you as my own kin; I respect and love you like a kinsman. But—God help me—I've gone further; I love you as a lover. I can't tear you out of my heart; I've tried because I saw no hope that you ever could fall in love with me—but I couldn't do it—I couldn't.

"If you go to the man you married I shall never love any other woman. That is the truth, and I know it, now!"

Her body was still rigid in his arms; her tense hands lay flat on his breast as though to repulse him.

But there was no strength in them and they had begun to tremble under the hard beating of his heart.

Her mouth, too, was quivering; her tear-wet eyes looked mutely into his; suddenly her body relaxed, yielded; and at his fierce embrace her hot mouth melted against his.

"Steve," he stammered—"Steve—can you care for me—in my way——?"

Under the deep-fringed lids her grey eyes looked at him vaguely; her lips were burning.

"Steve——" he whispered.

Her slowly lifted eyes alone responded.

"Can you love me?"

Her eyes closed again. And after a long while her lips responded delicately to his.

"Is it love, Steve?" he asked, trembling.

"I don't know.... I'm so tired—confused——"

Her arms fell from his neck to his shoulders and she opened her eyes, listlessly.

"I think it—must be," she said.... "I'm quite sure it is!"

"Love?"

"Yes."

CHAPTER XXV

Cleland, tremendously thrilled and excited by the first but faint response to his ardour which he had ever obtained of Stephanie, but uncertain, too, and almost incredulous as to its significance and duration, retained sufficient common sense and self-control to restrain him from pressing matters further. For Stephanie seemed so listless, so confused, so apparently unable to comprehend herself and these new and deep emotions which threatened her, that he forebore to seize what seemed to be an undue advantage.

They parted very quietly at her studio door; she naïvely admitting physical fatigue, headache, and a natural desire to be down in her darkened room; he to return to his studio, too much upset to work or to eat, later, when the dinner hour drew near.

However, he took his hat and stick and went down stairs. When he rang at her studio, Helen admitted him, saying that Stephanie was asleep in her room and had not desired any dinner. So they chatted for a while, and then Cleland took his departure and walked slowly up the street toward the Rochambeau. And the first person he met on University Place was Marie Cliff.

Perhaps it was the instinct to make amends to her for the unjust inferences drawn to her discredit a few hours before—perhaps it was the sheer excitement and suddenly renewed hope of Stephanie that incited him. Anyway, his gay greeting and unfeigned cordiality stirred the lonely girl to response, and when they had walked as far as the Beaux Arts, they were quite in the mood to dine together.

She was grateful to be with an agreeable man whom she liked and whom she could trust; his buoyant spirits and happy excitement were grateful for somebody on whom they could be vented.

In that perfumed tumult of music, wine, and dancing they seated themselves, greeted cordially by Louis, the courtly and incomparable; and they dined together luxuriously, sometimes rising to dance between courses, sometimes joining laughingly in a gay chorus sustained by the orchestra, sometimes, with elbows on the cloth and heads together, chattering happily of nothing in particular.

Men here and there bowed to her and to him; some women recognized and greeted them; but they were having much too good and too irresponsible a time together to join others or to invite approaches.

It was all quite harmless—a few moments' pleasure without other significance than that the episode had been born of a young man's high spirits and a young girl's natural relief when her solitude was made gay for her without reproach.

It was about eleven o'clock; Marie, wishing to be fresh for her posing in the morning, reminded him with frank regret that she ought to go.

"I wouldn't care," she said, "except that since I've left the Follies I have to depend on what I earn at Miss Davis's studio. So you don't mind, do you, Mr. Cleland?"

"No, of course not. It's been fine, hasn't it?"

"Yes. I've had such a good time!—and you are the nicest of men——"

Her voice halted; Cleland, watching her with smiling eyes, saw a sudden alteration of her pretty features. Then he turned to follow her fixed gaze.

"Hello," he said, "there's Harry Belter. Are you looking at *him*?"

Her face had grown very sober; she withdrew her gaze with a little shrug of indifference, now.

"Yes, I was looking at him," she said quietly.

"I didn't know you knew him."

"Didn't you? ... Yes, I used to know him."

He laughed:

"The recollection doesn't appear to be very pleasant."

"No."

"Too bad. I like Belter. He and I were at school together. He's enormously clever."

She remained silent.

"He really is. And he is an awfully good fellow at heart—a little pronounced, a trifle tumultuous sometimes, but——"

She said, evenly:

"I know him better than you do, Mr. Cleland."

"Really!"

"Yes.... I married him."

Cleland was thunderstruck.

"I was only seventeen," she said calmly. "I was on the stage at the time."

"Good Lord!" he murmured, astounded.

"He never spoke of it to you?"

"Never! I never dreamed——"

"I did. I dreamed." She shrugged her shoulders again, lightly. "But—I awoke very soon. My dream had ended."

"What on earth was the matter?"

"I am afraid you had better ask him," she replied gravely.

"I beg your pardon; I shouldn't have asked that question at all!"

"I didn't mind.... It is my tragedy—still. But let a man interpret it to men. A woman would not be understood."

"Are you—divorced?"

"No."

Cleland, still deeply astonished, looked across the room at Belter. That young man, very red, sat listening to Badger Spink's interminable chatter—pretending to listen; but his disturbed gaze was turned from time to time on Marie Cliff; and became hideously stony when it shifted to Cleland at moments without a sign of recognition.

"Shall we go?" asked the girl in a low voice.

They rose. A similar impulse seemed to seize Belter, and he got up almost blindly and strode across the floor.

Cleland, suddenly confronted at the door of the cloak-room, from which Marie was just emerging, said:

"Hello, Harry," in a rather embarrassed manner.

"Go to hell," replied the latter in a low voice of concentrated fury, and turned on his wife.

"Marie," he said unsteadily, "may I speak to you?"

"Certainly, but not now," replied the girl, who had turned white as a sheet.

Cleland touched the man's arm which was trembling:

"Better not interfere," he said pleasantly. "The disgrace of a row will be yours, not your wife's."

"What are *you* doing with my wife!" whispered Belter, his voice shaking with rage.

"I'll tell you, Harry. I'm showing her all the respect and friendship and sympathy that there is in me to to show to a charming, sincere young girl.... You know the sort of man I am. You ought to know your wife but evidently you don't. Therefore, your question is superfluous."

Belter drew him abruptly back to the foot of the stairs:

"If you're lying I'll kill you," he said. "Do you understand?"

"Yes. And if you make any yellow scene here, Harry, after I've taken your wife home, I'll come back and settle you. Do *you* understand? ... For God's sake," he added coldly, "if you've got any breeding, show it now!"

The tense silence between them lasted a full minute. Then, very slowly, Belter turned toward the cloak-room where, just within the door, his wife stood looking at him.

His sanguine features had lost all their colour in the greyish pallour that suddenly aged him. He went toward her; she made the slightest movement of recoil, but faced him calmly.

"I'm sorry," he said in a voice like a whisper. "I am—the fool that you—think me.... I'll—take myself off."

He bowed to her pleasantly, turned and passed Cleland with his hat still in his hand:

"I'm sorry, Jim; I know you're all right; and I'm—all wrong ... all wrong——"

"Come to the studio to-morrow. Will you, Harry?" whispered Cleland.

But Belter shook his head, continuing on his way to the street.

"I'll expect you," added Cleland. "Come about noon!"

The other made no sign that he had heard.

CHAPTER XXVI

Stephanie was awake with the sparrows the next morning, and her face betrayed not a trace of the pallour and fatigue which had made Helen a little anxious when she came into the studio after her interview with Cleland.

"I never had such a sleep in my life!" she announced, sauntering into Helen's room, already bathed and dressed, when at last she heard the latter's bath running. "I feel about sixteen, Helen."

"You look it, dear. What was the matter with you last night? Jim came about nine."

"Did he?" said the girl, turning to conceal a smile. "What did you do to entertain him."

"Talked about you," said Helen, watching her where she stood at the sunny window, absently pleating the sash curtains between idle fingers.

"Was he edified?"

"He seemed to be. When I changed the subject he went away."

Stephanie, at the window, suddenly laughed outright, but her back remained turned.

"Men are funny," she said.

"Women are funnier, Steve."

"What! Are *you* a traitor to your sex?"

"Sometimes," said Helen, absently. "I feel that my sex betrays me—and a few others of my own mind."

Stephanie turned and looked at her, still laughing:

"Like the Kiltie," she said, "you complain that the rest of the regiment is marching out of step with you."

"There's only a corporal's guard of us in step to the music," smiled Helen.... "You're looking radiant, Steve! I've never seen you as enchanting."

"I feel like enchanting the world—like a sorceress all ready for business.... This is a wonderful day, Helen."

"What are your engagements?"

"Two lessons this morning.... I don't know whether I'll go. Luncheon with Oswald at Tinto's. But it's so stuffy there in June, and the summer garden is so grubby."

"You're not going, then?"

"I don't know. I don't want to hurt his feelings," said the girl, reluctantly.

Helen sat up, flung off the bed clothes, and swung her superb young body out of bed.

"My bath's running over. Sit there and talk, Steve——"

But Stephanie turned to the window, her lips still edged with the same indefinable smile, and gazed at space through the netted squares of sunshine.

Breakfast was served in the studio presently. Helen joined her in bathrobe and slippers, knotting the belt around her waist.

"I'm wonderfully hungry," exclaimed Stephanie.

"It's more than you've been for several weeks, Steve."

Again the girl laughed, not meeting Helen's glance.

"What do you think of marriage?" she inquired presently. "I hope you haven't the very horrid ideas of Harry Belter."

"What are Harry's ideas?"

"He says it's the curse of civilization," said Stephanie, "and the invention of meddlesome and superstitious imbeciles. He says that the impulse toward procreation is mechanical and involuntary, and ought to be considered so without further personal responsibility; and that the State should nourish and educate whatever children were worth saving to replenish the waste, and put the others out of the way."

"Harry," remarked Helen, "talks for talking's sake very often."

"He's quite serious. His ideas are revolting. Never have I known a man who is so savagely an iconoclast as Harry Belter."

Helen smiled.

"Harry is a talker, dear. He doesn't believe a word of it. Harry Belter is, by nature, a fat, happy, witty, clever and very sentimental young man who also is so overwhelmingly selfish that anything which happens to annoy him he considers a cataclysmic catastrophe involving the entire civilized world in ruin!"

"What!"

"Do you wish to know what really is the matter with Harry Belter? Shall I tell you what actually has inspired this noisy iconoclast and moral anarchist with the urge for talking?"

"I'd like to know."

"I'll tell you. Three years ago he married a child of seventeen and started to mould her to suit himself. The only trouble was that she had a mind. She knew what she wanted to do and to be. She could not understand why this was incompatible with being his wife, especially as he had won her by his loudly reiterated advocacy of personal liberty and the fundamental necessity for the development of individualism."

"How do you know this?"

"She told me."

"When?"

"Three years ago."

"Who is she, Helen?"

Helen answered pleasantly, looking into the curious grey eyes:

"Her name, on the stage, is Marie Cliff. I have known her a long while and I am very fond of her."

Stephanie, scarlet, winced under her faintly humorous smile.

"They are divorced, then," she managed to say.

"No."

"Why not?"

"She has never given him any cause," said Helen, slowly. "No woman, of her own knowledge, can truly say one word against her character; nor can any man. She merely revolted at the tyranny he attempted, in the guise of affection, of course. She refused to be deprived of the liberty to think and act as she chose. She rejected the worn-out conventions with which he attempted to chain her—this apostle of personal freedom. She cared for her profession—he married her when she was on the stage—and she resolutely insisted on her liberty to continue it.

"The result was a family smash—her return to the stage. And since then she has refused to accept a penny from him and has supported herself by her profession, and, sometimes, by posing for artists.

"And that is the real story of Harry Belter and Marie Cliff. So you can believe as much as you choose of his views on matrimony."

After a flushed and painful silence, Stephanie said:

"Do you believe this to be true?"

"If one woman can judge and understand another, what I have told you is true, Steve. Long ago I won the child's confidence. She told me this quite frankly, and in a manner which makes the truth of it unmistakable.... We have become great friends, this little dancer and I. I don't think I ever knew a simpler nature or a more transparently honest one.... And that is why I was not worried at any little ephemeral romance that might amuse the child with Jim Cleland.... I was too certain of them—*both*," she added, looking calmly into the grey eyes that winced again and fell under her serene gaze.

"I'm a rotten little beast," said Stephanie.

"You're very feminine."

"Oh, Helen, I'm not. I'm a rotter. I didn't know it was in me. I thought I was above such things——"

"Nobody is, Steve, until they make the effort. High thinking requires more than a natural generosity and sympathy—more than innate sentiment. It is an attainment; and there is none without effort. And effort sometimes hurts."

"I want to speak to that girl when she comes in," said Stephanie. "I never have; I've never noticed her at all. I shall ask her to tea."

Helen laughed:

"She'll be here pretty soon. Of course you're not supposed to know about Harry."

"Of course not. But I'll make amends for my incivility. I *was* a beast! But—it's confusing—and hard for a girl to understand when a girl like that is so unconventional with one's—one's——"

"Brother?" suggested Helen drily.

"Yes.... I'm terribly ashamed.... Does Jim know?"

"About Harry Belter? No. I don't think anybody does."

"What a sham that man is!" exclaimed Stephanie hotly.

"No. He's a typical man, dear. Some women yield, some resist; that's all. And the man never has the slightest idea that he is tyrannizing. If you tell him that he'll be amazed and furious. He'll point out to you all the love and affection and solicitude and money he's lavished on the object of his adoration; he'll portray for you her obstinacy, her coldness, her shocking ingratitude for benefits received. He really believes himself a martyr.

"Steve, man's idea is still that to the victor belong the spoils. We are the spoils of the chase, dear. His conventions were made to contain us in a sort of game-preserve before capture; cage us after we are made prisoner. His laws fetter us; a misstep ruins us; irregularities never impair him. That is the ancient view; that, still, is the secret view of man; that is his inborn conviction regarding us and himself.... And, very slowly, we are beginning his education."

"I didn't know you felt that way," said Stephanie.

"I do.... But if I were in love"—she laughed gaily—"I'd be inclined to take my chances with this monster I have painted for you."

"You *do* believe in marriage?"

"What else is there, dear? Harry's piffle means nothing except that a plucky girl has begun his education, and it hurts. I don't know what else there is to take the place of marriage. It's the parties to the contract who don't understand its essence."

"What would you suggest?" inquired Stephanie curiously.

"Education. A girl should be brought up to master some trade or profession. She should support herself by it. She should never go to her husband empty-handed and unable to support herself.

"If, then, under the mutual marriage contract, her earning capacity be necessarily checked by child-birth, and by the later and natural demands of progeny, these alone should temporarily but only in part interrupt her in the exercise of her trade or profession. And he should pay for them.

"But she should have a life work to do; and so should he, no matter how ample their means. Domestic drudgery must be done by others hired for the purpose, or else by themselves, sharing alike. In no other way that I see can marriage remain endurable."

After a silence Stephanie said naïvely:

"I haven't any trade or profession."

"You are a graduate nurse."

"Oh. I forgot. That *is* comforting!"

"Also you are already married."

The girl looked up in a startled way, as though hearing this information for the first time. Helen gazed gravely into the troubled grey eyes:

"Do you regret it, Steve?"

"I don't know. I haven't had time to think about it."

"It's high time, isn't it?"

"Y-yes.... I've got to do a—a lot of thinking some day, I suppose." She gazed absently into space for a few moments; then again the faintest of smiles curved her lips and she bent her head and remained very still, deep in reflection.

... "Did you wish to speak to Marie Cliff?" asked Helen, breaking the prolonged silence.

The girl looked up, dim-eyed, confused:

"Yes."

"I think she just went into the court-yard."

Stephanie's wool-gathering wits returned; she sprang up and walked swiftly out to the court, where the white horse was just being led in and the pretty dancer stood unpinning her hat.

She turned when Stephanie entered, and the girl went up to her, smilingly, and offered her hand.

"Miss Davis will be here in a few moments," she said. "I thought I'd come and tell you."

"Thank you," said Marie Cliff, curiously.

"Also," said Stephanie, "I wanted to tell you how very lovely you are on that horse. I had a glimpse of you last week, and you were too enchanting! No wonder Helen's study is so exquisite."

The little dancer flushed brightly. Her gloved hand still lay lifelessly in Stephanie's, who had retained it; her childish eyes asked for the reason of this kindness from a girl who had never noticed her.

Then, reading the unuttered question, Stephanie blushed too:

"I'm not much older than you are," she said, "and I'm not nearly as sensible. I've been rude enough to ignore you. Could you forgive me and be friends?"

"Yes," said Marie Cliff.

That was all the explanation offered or asked.

"Will you come to tea at five?"

"I should like to."

"I'd love to have you. And if it doesn't bore you, would you tell me something about your very beautiful profession? You see, stage dancing fascinates me, and I'm taking lessons and I've an inclination to become a professional."

"I'd love to talk about it with you!" said Marie Cliff impulsively. "I'll tell you everything I know about it.... And I do know a little, because I have been on the stage since I was a child."

"You're one now," said Stephanie, laughing, "—an adorable one!" And she bent and kissed the little dancer on the lips.

"I'm glad we're friends," she said. "Don't forget five o'clock."

"N-no," said Marie Cliff unsteadily.

CHAPTER XXVII

At five o'clock that afternoon Cleland, working fiercely on his manuscript toward a climax he had not planned for but which, suddenly but logically developing, threatened with disaster his leading lady and the young gentleman playing opposite, heard a step on the threshold of his open door.

"Hello, Harry!" he said with a friendly but vague wave of his pencil—for he had not stepped quite clear of the story in which he had been living among people never born—"I'd rather given you up. Come in and close the door."

"I couldn't keep away," said Belter hoarsely. He came in and closed the door. He looked even more grey and haggard than he had the night before.

"I expected you this morning," said Cleland, stepping clear of his story now, and looking very soberly at his old school-friend.

"I didn't intend to come at all." He seated himself in the chair indicated. "But I couldn't keep away."

"You look about all in."

"I didn't sleep."

Cleland got up, walked to the ice-box, knocked off a bit of ice with a tack-hammer, and leisurely constructed a highball.

"Here you are, Harry. I can't; I'm working. There are cigars by your elbow, cigarettes, too."

Belter looked vacantly at the iced bracer, then he dropped both elbows on the edge of the desk and took, his drawn face between his hands.

Cleland began to pace the studio. Presently he halted by Belter's chair.

"Hell," he said pleasantly, "cut out the tragedy! It's good enough for my novel, where the poor devils I write about have to do what I make 'em. But you and I are free to do what we choose."

"Yes.... And I've done it.... I've done what I chose. Where has it landed me, Cleland?"

He looked at the frosty glass, pushed it away from him:

"That was a sorry spectacle I made of myself last night. Can you beat that for degradation—a man who has made a damnable failure of marriage, skulking at his wife's heels to snap and snarl at any decent man who is civil to her?"

"Don't talk so bitterly——"

"I'm indulging in a luxury, Cleland—the luxury of truth, of honesty, of straight thinking.... I've been bragging about it, celebrating it, extolling it for years. But I never did any until last night."

"You're rubbing it in pretty hard, Harry. A man is bound to make mistakes——"

"*I'm* the mistake! I realize it, now—as Verne realized it. That's why he did what he did. You don't, if you *are* right.... I never supposed I could behave as rottenly as I did last night. But it's been a long strain.... You heard that rotten outbreak of mine concerning women—the night we heard what Verne had done? Well, the strain was showing.... It broke me last night...."

He lifted his head and looked intently at Cleland:

"It was the shock of seeing her in a public place with another man. I had never seen her with any other man. It's nearly three years, now, since I made a damned ass of myself, and she very quietly went her way leaving me to go mine.... And in all that time, Cleland, there has not been a breath of suspicion against her. She has been in the lighter and more frivolous shows almost continuously; but she has lived as straight a life as any woman ever lived.... And I know it.... And I knew it—cur that I was—when I spoke to her as I did, and turned on you like a rotter——"

He extended his hand and took hold of the iced glass, but let it rest there.

"I've lied and lied and lied," he said, "to myself about myself; to others about my estimate of women.... I'm just a four-flusher, Cleland. The best of 'em are better than our stars. The remainder average as well as we do.... Verne got what was coming to him.... And so have I, Cleland—so have I——"

"Wait a moment——"

"Wait?" Belter laughed mirthlessly. "All right. I know how to wait. Waiting is the best thing I do. I've waited for nearly three years before I've told myself the truth. I've told it now, to myself, and to you.... But it's too late to tell it to her."

"Do you think it is?"

Belter looked up in pallid surprise:

"Of course."

"I wonder," mused Cleland.

Belter's sunken gaze had become remote and fixed again. He said, half to himself:

"I couldn't let her alone. I couldn't learn to mind my own business. I'd been bawling aloud my theories for years, Cleland, but I couldn't apply them to her or to myself. I bragged about my mania for personal liberty, for tolerance; I lauded the maxim of 'hands off.' But I couldn't keep my meddling hands off her; I couldn't understand that she had the right to personal liberty—freedom in the pursuit of happiness. No; I tried to head her off, check her, stampede her into the common corral whither all men's wives are supposed to be driven—tried to rope her and throw her and blindfold, hobble and break her to suit myself.... And, Cleland, do you know what happened? I found I had come upon a character, a mind, a personality which would not endure the tyranny we men call domestic affection.... That's what I discovered.... And I did not do the breaking. No; she has accomplished that. And—here I am, to admit it to you.... And I think I'll go, now——"

Cleland walked slowly to the door with him, one arm resting on his shoulder:

"I wish you'd tell her what you've told me, Harry."

"It's too late. She wouldn't care, now."

"Are you very sure?"

"Do you think a man can use a woman the way I have used her, and make her care a straw about what I say to her now?"

Cleland said in a low voice:

"I can't answer you. I don't understand women; I write about them.... I have troubles of my own, too. So I can't advise you, Harry.... Are you still in love with her?"

He said in a dead voice:

"I've always been. It's done things to me. I'll die of it, one day. But that's no argument."

"I don't know. Tell her."

"It's no argument," repeated Belter. "It's purely selfish. That's what I am—purely selfish. I'm thinking of myself. I'm in love with her.... And she's better off without me."

"All the same, I think I'd take a chance. I think I'd tell her. After all, you owe her that much—whatever she may choose to do about it."

"She doesn't care, now."

"Still, you owe it to her. You're not a welcher, you know."

They had reached the foot of the stairs. Helen, coming out of the enclosed court, met them face to face; and they exchanged amiabilities there outside her studio door.

"Come in and have some tea," she said. "Harry, you look ill. Are you? Anyway, a cup of tea won't slay you in your tracks——" fitting her key to the door all the while she was talking—"so come in like two polite young men——"

The door swung open; they entered.

"Oho!" exclaimed Helen; "Steve must be here because the kettle-lamp is lighted. We'll have something to nibble presently, I expect. Find a chair, Harry, and watch that kettle. Jim, show him the cigarettes. I'm going to take off this blouse and I'll be back with Steve in a moment——"

She stopped short: Stephanie and Marie Cliff, coming from the kitchenette, appeared at the further end of the studio, the former bearing a big bowl of strawberries, the latter a tray of little cakes.

Stephanie greeted the newcomers with an airy wave of her hand; Marie Cliff promptly lost her colour; but there was nothing to do except to advance, which she continued doing, moving very close to Stephanie's elbow.

The situation was going to be as awkward as the people involved made it: Cleland, secretly aghast, came forward to relieve Stephanie and Marie of their burdens:

"If there isn't enough food for a party, I'll take Harry and go," he said gaily. "It isn't done—this grasshopper-like invasion of your natural resources."

"Piffle," said Helen, "there's plenty."

Harry Belter, who had been standing in the middle of the floor as though petrified, wrenched himself out of his trance and put his legs in motion. His face was very red: he greeted Stephanie elaborately but mutely; he bowed mutely to his wife.

She had managed to recover her self-control: a deep flush invaded her pallour. Then, under the eyes of them all, very quietly she did a thing which confirmed the

admiration and respect of everybody there: she extended her child-like hand to her husband, saying:

"It is nice to see you again, and I'm very sure that there is enough tea for everybody."

Her hand lay in her husband's for an appreciable moment; then he bent over it, lower, to conceal the nervous working of his features—and touched it with trembling lips—something he had never before done in all his life—and passing, by the same token, out of the free and arid desert of his folly, he rested, *sub jugum*, beside the still waters of eternal truth.

Helen went on toward her room to shed her clay-stained smock; Stephanie investigated the kettle which was approaching the boiling point, and Cleland deposited the provender on a neighbouring table.

"Keep away from them," whispered Stephanie, close beside him—so close that the fragrance of her hair and breath caressed his cheek.

"You darling," he motioned with his lips.

"Oh, dear! Are we on *such* a footing!" she asked, with a little quick-drawn breath of smiling dismay.

"Why not?" he said under his breath. "You're awake, now."

"Am I?"

"Are you not, dearest?"

"I—had a wonderful sleep last night," she said perversely. "I don't know whether I'm awake or not."

"Oh, Steve!——"

"I don't, I tell you!——" keeping her gaze smilingly averted and very busy with kettle and tea-caddy.... "Where have you been all day?"

"I came down, but you had fled to your lesson. Then I had a date with H. Belter, but he didn't appear until nearly five. It was a strenuous interview."

She lifted her eyes to his, full of interested inquiry.

"Yes," he nodded; "he's found out he's an ass, and he's in love with his wife. If she can stand for him now, after these three years, I think he'll make a better husband than the average."

"She's a dear," murmured Stephanie. "What a painful situation!—but wasn't she dignified and sweet? Oh, I do hope she cares enough for Harry to give him another chance.... Are they amiable together over there? I don't want to turn around."

He cautiously surveyed the scene out of a corner of his eye:

"She's seated beside the piano. It's evident she hasn't asked him to be seated. They are horribly serious. He looks ten years older."

"We must let them alone. Tea is ready, but I sha'n't say so until they move.... What was it you asked me, Jim?—whether I am awake? ... Do you know that I believe I'm stirring in my slumbers because—because, now and then—just for an instant—a

stab of contrition goes through and through me. Do you know why? I have a glimmering of guilty misgiving concerning this painful throb of conscience——"

She looked about her, searching among the paraphernalia of the tea tray. "Oh, the deuce! I remember, now, that we're out of lemons! You have some, haven't you?"

"Yes, I'll run up and——"

"I know where they are in your ice box. I'll find them——"

"What nonsense! Wait!——"

She had started already; but swiftly as her light feet sped he overtook her on the stairs; gathered her into his arms, all pink and breathing rapidly:

"Steve—my darling!——"

"I thought you might do this.... I wanted to see——"

"What?"

"Whether it could happen to me again—what I experienced with you——"

There was a silence: her young lips melted against his; lingered; her arms tightened around his neck. And the next instant she had freed herself, hot-cheeked, disconcerted.

"Oh, it, was—quite true——" she stammered, resting against the banisters with one hand pressed tightly over her heart. "My curiosity is satisfied.... *Please!*—Jim, dear—we ought to behave rationally—oughtn't we?"

But she did not resist when he framed her face between his hands; and she suffered his lips again, and again her slight response and the grey eyes vaguely regarding him shook his self-control.

"Will you try to love me, Steve?"

"I seem to be doing it."

"Is it really love, Steve? Do you truly care for me?"

"Oh, dear, yes!" she said, with a quick-drawn breath which ended in a quiet sigh, scarcely audible. Then a faintly humorous smile dawned in her eyes: "You're changing, Jim. You always were very wonderful to me, but you also *were* mortal. Now, you're changing; you are putting on a glorious, iridescent immortality before my eyes. I'm quite bewildered—quite dazzled—and my mind isn't very clear—especially when you kiss me——"

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No, I'm not. That's the way with the gods when they start a love affair with a mortal girl. Sometimes she runs, but they always catch her or turn her into a tree or a waterfall or something they can acquire and fence in, and visit like a plot in a cemetery. And if she doesn't run away, then she just falls into a silly trance with her Olympian lover, and somebody comes along and raises the dickens with them both.... And now I'd like to know what's going to happen to me?"

"You're going to try to fall in love with me first."

"Oh. And then?"

"Marry me."

"Oh. And what will old lady Civilization say? I told you somebody would raise the dickens!"

"Who cares?"

"I suppose I wouldn't care if I loved you enough."

"Will you try?"

"Oh, dear." ... She freed herself gracefully, stepped back a stair lower, and leaned on the rail, considering.

"Oh, dear," she repeated under her breath. "What a tangle! ... I don't know why I've let myself—care for you—in your way. I ought to stop it. Could you stand it?" she added naïvely. And the reply in his eyes scared her.

"Oh, this is serious!" she murmured. "We've gotten on much further than I realized.... I remember, when you began to make love to me, I thought it very sweet and boyish of you—to fall in love with your own sister. But I've begun to make love to you, now.... And I ought not to."

"Because you are married?" he asked under his breath.

"Oh, yes. It won't do for me to make advances to you."

"When have you made any advances?"

"I came out here. I wanted you to—kiss me. Oh, this isn't going to do at all. I can see that, now!——" She framed her face in her hands and shook her head. "Jim—dearest, dearest of men—it won't do. I didn't realize that I was caring for you in this way. Why," she added, her grey eyes widening, "it is almost dangerous!"

"The thing to do," he said, reddening, "is to tell Oswald."

"I can't tell him!"

"You've got to, if you fall in love with me."

"Oh, Jim, it would be too heartless! You don't know——"

"No, I don't!" he exclaimed impatiently, "and I think it's time I did! You can't be in love with two men at the same time."

She blushed furiously:

"I—he never even touched my fingers with his lips! And you—you take me into your arms with no more hesitation than if I were a child.... I believe I've behaved like one with you. I'm old enough to be ashamed, and I'm beginning to be."

"Is it because you're married?"

"Yes, it is! I can't let myself go. I can't let myself care for—for what you do—to me. I came out here to give you the chance—ready to learn something—desiring to. I mustn't take any more lessons—from you."

He said:

"I am going to tell Oswald that I care for you, Steve."

To his astonishment, tears flashed in the grey eyes:

"If you do," she said, "it will be like killing something that makes no resistance. It—it's too cruel—like murder. I—I couldn't bring myself——"

"Why? Did you marry him out of pity?"

She bit her lip and stood staring into vacancy, one hand tightening on the stair-rail, the other worrying her lips.

"I tell you," she said slowly, her gaze still remote, "the only thing to do is to do nothing.... Because I'm afraid.... I couldn't bear it. I'd have to think of it all my life and I—I simply couldn't endure it.... You mustn't ask me any more."

"Very well," he said coldly. "And I think we'd better go back to the studio——"

As he passed her he paused, waiting for her to precede him. She turned; her hand fell from the banisters and hung beside her; but the slender fingers groped for his, slipped among them, tightened, drawing him partly toward her; and her left foot moved forward a trifle, blocking his way and bringing them closely confronted.

"I—love you," she faltered. "And I don't know what to do about it."

Crushed into his embrace she did not seem to know any the more what she was going to do about it. Her flushed cheek lay hot against his; her hands moved restlessly on his shoulders; she tried to think—strove to consider, to see what it was that lay before her—what she had to do about this matter of falling in love. But her fast beating heart told her nothing; a listless happiness invaded her; mind and body yielded to the lethargy; thought was an effort, and the burden lay with this wonderful being who held her in his arms—who, once mortal—had assumed the magic of immortality—this youthful god who was once a man—her lover.

"It's got to come right somehow, my darling," he whispered.

"Yes—somehow."

"You'll explain it some day—so that I shall understand how to make it come right."

She did not answer, but her cheek pressed closer against his.

When they entered the studio Helen, seated by the tea table, rose with a gesture of warning:

"That child is in my room and Harry is with her. They were standing together over there by the piano when I came out of my room. I saw at once that she was on the verge of something—she tried to look at me—tried to speak; and Harry didn't even make the effort. So I said, quite casually, 'It *is* frightfully close in the studio, Marie. But you'll find it cool in my room. Better lie down in there for a moment.' ... They're in there. I don't know what I hope, exactly. She is such a dear.... Where on earth have you two been?"

"On the stairs," said Stephanie. "We started to get something—what was it, Jim? Oh, yes; there's no lemon here——"

"Did you get any?"

"No; we just conversed." She picked up a cake, nibbled it, selected a strawberry and nibbled that, too.

The tea wasn't fresh, but she sipped it, sitting there very silent and preoccupied with now and then a slow side-glance at her lover, who was attempting to make the conversation general.

Helen responded lightly, gaily, maintaining her part in a new and ominous situation which had now become perfectly recognizable to her.

For these two people on either side of her had perfectly betrayed themselves—this silent, flushed girl, still deep under the spell of the master magic of the world—this too talkative, too plausible, too absent-minded young man who ate whatever was handed to him, evidently unaware that he was eating anything, and whose eyes continually reverted to the girl.

The smile on Helen's lips was a little fixed, perhaps, but it was generous and sweet and untroubled. A man sat at her elbow whom she could care for, if she let herself go. A girl sat on the other side who was another man's wife, and who was already in love with this man. But the deep anxiety in Helen's heart was not visible in her smile.

"What about that very tragic pair in my room?" she asked at last. "Shall we clear out and give them the whole place to settle it in? It's getting worse than a problem play——"

She looked up; Oswald Grismer stood on the threshold of the open door.

"Come in!" she said gaily. "I'll give you tea in a few minutes."

Grismer came forward, saluted her with easy grace, greeted Stephanie with that amiable ceremony which discloses closer intimacy, turned to Cleland with that wistful cordiality which never seemed entirely confident.

"Oswald," said Helen, "there's a problem play being staged in my bed-room."

"Marie Cliff and Harry Belter," explained Stephanie in a low voice.

Grismer was visibly astonished.

"That's amusing," he said pleasantly.

"Isn't it?" said Helen. "I don't know whether I'm pleased. She's such a little brick! And Harry has lived as he pleased.... Oh, Lord! Men *are* queer. People sneer at a problem play, but everybody ever born is cast for some typical problem-play part. And sooner or later, well or badly, they play it."

"Critics talk rot; why expect more of the public?" inquired Grismer. "And isn't it funny what a row they make about sex? After all, that's what the world is composed of, two sexes, with a landscape or marine background. What else is there to write about, Cleland?"

The latter laughed:

"It merely remains a matter of good taste. You sculptors have more latitude than painters; painters more than we writers. Pathology should be used sparingly in fiction—all sciences, in fact. Like a clove of garlic applied to a salad bowl, a touch of science is sufficient to flavour art; more than that makes it reek. Better cut out the art altogether if the science fascinates you, and be the author of 'works' instead of mere books."

Stephanie, watching Cleland while he was speaking, nodded:

"Yes," she said, "one could write fiction about a hospital nurse, but not about nursing. It wouldn't have any value."

Grismer said:

"We're really very limited in the world. We have land and water, sun and moon and stars, two sexes, love and hate to deal with. Everything else is merely a modification of these elemental fixtures.... It becomes tiresome, sometimes."

"Oswald! Don't talk like a silly pessimist," said Stephanie sharply.

He laughed in his easy, attractive way and sat gently swinging one long leg, which was crossed over the other.

He said:

"There is in every living and articulated thing a nerve which, if destroyed, destroys for its possessor a certain area of interest in life. People become pessimists to that extent.

"But, where all the nerves converge to form the vital ganglion, a stroke there means extermination."

"Apropos of what is this dissertation wished upon us?" asked Stephanie with an uneasy smile.

"Did you ever see a paralyzed spider, Stephanie?—alive, breathing, destined to live for weeks, perhaps, and anyway until the wasp's egg under it hatches and becomes a larva to devour it?

"Well, the old wasp required fresh meat for its young, so, with her sting, she annihilated the nerve controlling motion, laid her egg, certain that her progeny would find perfectly fresh food when born. But if she had thrust that sting of hers a little higher—at the juncture of skull and thorax—death would have taken that spider like a stroke of lightning."

He laughed:

"So I say it's better to get the stroke of Fate in the neck than to get it in any particular area and live for a while a paralyzed victim for some creature ultimately to eat alive."

There was a silence. Helen broke it with pleasant decision:

"This is *not* an appetizing conversation. If anybody wishes any the tea is ready."

There was enough daylight left in the studio so the lamps remained unlighted.

"Do you suppose we ought to go out somewhere?" asked Stephanie, "and leave the place to those two poor things in there? You know they may be too unhappy or too embarrassed to come out and run the gauntlet."

But Stephanie was wrong; for, as she ended, Belter appeared at the end of the studio in the fading light. His young wife came slowly forward beside him. The strain, the tension, the effort, all were visible, but the girl held herself erect and the man fairly so.

There was tea for them—no easier way to mitigate their ordeal. Conversation became carelessly general; strawberries and little cakes were tasted; a cigarette or two lighted.

Then, after a while there chanced to fall a silence; and the young wife knew that the moment belonged to her.

"I think," she said in a distinct but still little voice, "that we ought to go home. If you are ready, Harry——"

CHAPTER XXVIII

By the end of the first week in June Cleland was in a highly excited state of mind in regard to his infant novel, in which all the principals were now on the edge of catastrophe.

"I don't know how they got there," he said nervously to Badger Spink, who had dropped in to suggest himself as illustrator in case any magazine took the story for serial publication.

Spink's clever, saturnine features remained noncommittal. If Cleland turned out to be a coming man, he wished to participate and benefit; if he proved a failure he desired to remain pleasantly aloof.

For the only thing in the world that interested Badger Spink was his own success in life; and he had a horror of contaminating it by any professional association with mediocrity or failure.

"What's your story about?" he inquired with that bluntness that usually passed for the disinterested frankness of good comradeship.

"Oh, it's about a writer of stories," said Cleland, vaguely.

"He's the hero?"

"If you'd call him that. What is a hero, Spink? I never saw one in real life."

Spink squinted. It was his way of grinning.

"Well, a literary hero," he said, "is one who puts it over big on his first novel. The country goes crazy about his book, the girls go crazy over *him*, publishers go panting after him waving wads; editors flag him with fluttering cheques. That's one sort of hero, Cleland. But he's a myth. The real thing is a Charlie Chaplin. All the same, you'd better let your hero make a hit with his novel. If you don't, good night!"

Cleland's features became troubled:

"I suppose *his* book ought to make a hit to make *my* book popular," he said. "But as a matter of fact it doesn't. I'm afraid the character I've drawn is no hero. He's like us all, Spink; he writes a book; friends flatter; critics slam; the public buys a number of copies, and it's all over in a few weeks. A punk hero—what?"

"Very. He won't get over with the young person," said Spink. "In these days of the movie and the tango nobody becomes very much excited over novels anyway; and if you don't startle the country with your hero's first novel—make it the sort that publishers advertise as 'compelling' and 'a new force in literature'—well, you'll get the hook, I'm afraid. Listen to me: work in the 'urge'; make it plain that there's not a trace of 'sex' in your hero's book or in yours—or any 'problem' either. Cheeriness does it! That intellectual eunuch, the 'Plain Peepul,' is squatting astride of the winged broncho. His range reaches from the Western plains to the New England kitchen. The odours of the hired man and of domestic dishwater are his favourite perfume; his heroines smirk when Fate jumps upon them with hobnailed boots; his heroes are shaven as blue as any metropolitan waiter and they all are bursting out of their blue flannel shirts with

muscular development and abdominal prosperity. That's the sort, Cleland, if you want to make money!" He shrugged his shoulders. "But of course if you don't, well, then, go on and transmute leaden truth with your imagination into the truer metal wrought by art. If there's a story in it, people will excuse the technical excellence; if there isn't, they won't read it. And there you are."

They remained silent for a while, and Spink regarded him shrewdly from moment to moment out of his bright, bold eyes. And he came pretty close to the conclusion that he was wasting time.

"Did you ever make any success with your stuff!" he inquired abruptly.

Cleland shook his head.

"Never heard anything from anything you've done?"

"Once," said Cleland, "a woman wrote me from a hospital that she had read a novel I published in England, when I was living in France.... She said it had made her forget pain.... It's pleasant to get a letter like that."

"Very," said Spink drily, "unless she meant your book was an anodyne." He laughed his abrupt, harsh laugh and took himself off.

Belter, who haunted the studio now toward noon, so that he could take his wife to luncheon, roared with laughter when Cleland mentioned Spink's visit.

"When there's any rumour of a new man and a new book, Spink's always certain to appear out of a cloudless sky, like a buzzard investigating smoke for possible pickings. If you make good, he'll stick to you like a burdock burr. If you don't, he's too busy to bother you. So he's been around, has he?"

"Yes."

"Watch him, Cleland. Spink is the harbinger of prosperity. He associates himself only with the famous and successful. He is clever, immensely industrious, many sided, diversely talented. He can write, rehearse and stage a play for the Ten Cent Club; he can draw acceptably in any medium; he can write sparkling stuff; his executive ability is enormous, his energy indefatigable. But—that's the man, Cleland. You'll have him at your elbow if you become famous; you'll see only the back of his bushy head if you fail."

Cleland smiled as he ran over the pile of pencilled pages on the desk before him, pausing here and there to cross out, interline, punctuate.

"When Oswald Grismer was rich and promised so well as a sculptor," said Belter, "Spink appeared as usual out of a clear sky, alighted, folded his wings, and hopped gravely beside Grismer until the poor devil came his cropper."

"Now, he's always going somewhere in a hurry when he encounters Grismer, but his 'How are you! Glad to see you!' en passant, is even more cordially effusive than before. For Badger Spink never wittingly makes an enemy, either."

"Poor Spink. He misses a lot," commented Cleland, renumbering some loose pages. "Tell me, Harry, how are things going with you?"

Belter said, naïvely:

"When a man's quite crazy about his wife, everything else goes well."

Cleland laughed:

"That sounds convincing. What a little brick she is! I suppose you're lunching with her."

"Rather!" He looked at his watch. "God knows," he added, "I don't want to bore her, but it would take a machine gun to drive me away.... I tell you, Cleland, three years of what I went through leave scars that never entirely heal.... I don't yet quite see how she could forgive me."

"Has she?"

"I'm trying to understand that she has. I *know* she has, because she says so. But it's hard to comprehend.... She's a very, very wonderful woman, Cleland."

"I can see that."

"And whatever she wishes, I wish. Whatever she desires to do is absolutely all right because she desires it. But, do you know, Cleland, she's sweet enough to ask my opinion? Think of it!—think of her asking my opinion!—willing to consider my wishes after what I've done to her! I tell you no man can study faithfully enough, minutely enough, the character of the girl he loves. I've had my lesson—a terrible one. I told you once that it was killing me—would end me some day. It would have if she had not held out her hand to me.... It was the finest, noblest thing any woman has ever done."

All fat men are prone to nervous emotion; Belter got up briskly, but his features were working, and he merely waved his hand in adieu and galloped off down stairs to be in time to join his wife when she emerged from her seance with the white circus horse in Helen's outer workshop.

Cleland, still lingering with fluttering solicitude over his manuscript, heard a step on the stair and Stephanie's fresh young voice in gay derision:

"You're like a fussy old hen, Jim! Let that chick alone and take me somewhere to lunch! I've had a strenuous lesson and I'm starved——"

She dodged his demonstration, eluding him with swift grace, and put the desk between them.

"No! *No!* I chanced, just now, to witness the meeting of the Belters, and that glimpse of conjugal respectability has stiffened my moral backbone.... Besides, I'm deeply worried about you, Jim."

"About me?"

"Certainly. It fills me with anxiety that you should so far degrade yourself as to attempt to kiss a respectable married woman——"

She dodged again, just in time, but he vaulted over the desk and she found herself imprisoned in his arms.

"I'll submit if you don't rumple me," she said. "I've such a darling gown on—be very circumspect, Jim——"

She lifted her face and met his lips, retained them with a little sigh, placing her gloved hands behind his head. They became very still, very serious; her grey eyes grew vague under his deep gaze which caressed them; her arms drew his head closer to her face. Then, very slowly, their lips parted, and she laid her hand on his shoulder and drew his arm around her waist.

In silence they paced the studio for a while, slowly, and in leisurely step with each other deeply preoccupied.

"Steve," he said, "it's the first week in June. The city will be intolerable in a fortnight. Don't you think that we ought to open Runner's Rest?"

"You are going up there with Oswald, aren't you?" she asked, raising her eyes.

"Yes, in a day or two. Don't you think we'd better try to get some servants and open the house for the summer?"

She considered the matter:

"You know I've never been there since you went abroad, Jim. I believe we would find it delightful. Don't you?"

"I do, indeed."

"But—is it going to be all right—just you and I alone there? ... You know even when we considered each other as brother and sister there was a serious question about our living together unless an older woman were installed"—she laughed—"to keep us in order. It was silly, then, but—I don't know whether it's superfluous now."

"Would Helen come?"

"Like a shot! Of *course* that's the solution. We can have parties, too.... I wonder what is going to happen to us."

"What!"

"To you and me, Jim.... It's becoming such a custom—your arm around me this way; and that secret and deliciously uneasy thrill I feel when I come to you alone—and all my increasing load of guilt——"

"There's only one end to it, Steve."

"Jim, I *can't* tell him. I'm *afraid*! ... Something happened once.... I was scarcely eighteen——" She suddenly clung to him, pressing her face convulsively against his shoulder. He could feel the shiver passing over her.

"Tell me," he said.

"Not now.... There doesn't seem to be any way of letting you understand.... I was not yet eighteen. I never dreamed of—of love—between you and me.... And Oswald fascinated me. He does now. He always will. There is something about him that draws me, influences me, stirs me deeply—deeply——"

She turned, looked at him, flung one arm around his neck:

"Will you let me tell you this and still understand? It's a—a different kind of affection.... But it's deep, powerful—there are bonds that hold me—that I can't break—dare not.... Always he was attractive to me—a strange, sensitive, unhappy boy.... And then—something happened."

"Will you tell me what?"

"Oh, Jim, it involves a question of honour.... I can't betray confidence.... Let me tell you something. Did you know that Oswald, ever since you and he were boys together, cared more for your good opinion than for anything else in the world?"

"That's strange."

"*He* is strange. He has told me that, as a boy, one of the things that most deeply hurt him was that he was never invited to your house. And I can see that the fact that dad never took any notice of his father mortified him bitterly."

"What has this to do with you and me, Steve?"

"A great deal, unhappily. The seeds of tragedy lay in the boy's soul of Oswald Grismer—a tender sensitiveness almost girlish, which he concealed by assertiveness and an apparent callous disregard of opinion; a pride so deep that in the shock of injury it became morbid.... But, Jim, deep in that unhappy boy's soul lay also nobler qualities—blind loyalty, the generosity that costs something—the tenderness that renounces.... Oh, I know—I know. I was only a girl and I didn't understand. I was fascinated by the golden, graceful youth of him—thrilled by the deeper glimpse of that mystery which attracts all women—the veiled unhappiness of a man's secret soul.... That drew me; the man, revealed, held me.... I have told you that I never dreamed there was any question about you. I was obsessed, wrapped up in this man so admired, so talented, so utterly misunderstood by all the world excepting me. It almost intoxicated me to know that I alone knew him—that I alone was qualified to understand, sympathize, advise, encourage, rebuke this strange, inexplicable golden figure about whom and whose rising talent the world of art was gossiping and guessing all around me."

After a long silence he said:

"Is that all you have to tell me?"

"Nearly all.... His father died.... My aunt died. These facts seem unrelated. But they were not.... And then—then—Oswald lost his money.... Everything.... And I—married him.... There was more than I have told you.... I think I may tell this—I had better tell you, perhaps.... Did you ever know that my aunt employed lawyers to investigate the matter concerning the money belonging to Chiltern Grismer's sister, who was my mother's mother?"

"No."

"She did. I have seen Mr. Grismer at the hospital once or twice. He came to see my aunt in regard to the investigation.... The last time he came, my aunt was ill, threatened with pneumonia. I saw him passing through the grounds. He looked frightfully haggard and ill. He came out of the infirmary where my aunt was, in about an hour, and walked slowly down the gravel path as though he were in a daze.... He died shortly afterward.... And then my aunt died.... And Oswald lost his money.... And I—married him."

"Is that all you can tell me?"

After a silence she looked up, her lip quivering:
"All except this." And she put her arms around his neck and dropped her head on his breast.

CHAPTER XXIX

In reply to a letter of hers, Cleland wrote to Stephanie the middle of June from Runner's Rest in the Berkshires:

STEVE, DEAR:

The place is charming and everything is ready for you and Helen whenever you care to come. I had the caretaker's wife and daughters here for several days' scrubbing and cleaning woodwork, windows and floors. They've put a vacuum cleaner on everything else and the house shines!

As for the new servants, they seem the usual sort, unappreciative, sure to quarrel among themselves, fairly efficient, incapable of gratitude, and likely to leave you in the lurch if the whim seizes them. They've all come to me with complaints of various sorts. The average servant detests clean, fresh quarters in the country and bitterly misses the smelly and oily animation of the metropolitan slums.

But this unpretentious old place is very beautiful, Steve. You haven't been here since you were a girl, and it will be a surprise to you to find how really lovely are this plain old house and simple grounds.

Oswald has made several sketches of the grounds, and is making others for the pool and fountain. He is anything but melancholy; he strolls about quite happily with the eternal cigarette in his mouth and an enormous rose-scented white peony in his button-hole; and in the evening he and I light a fire in the library—for the evenings are a trifle chilly still—and we read or chat or discuss men and affairs most companionably. The occult charm in this man, of which you are so conscious, I myself can perceive. There seems to be, deep within him, an inexplicable quality which appeals—something latent, indefinable—something that you suspect to be wistful, yet which is too sensitive, too self-distrustful to respond to the very sympathy it seems to draw.

Steve, I have asked him to spend July with us. He seemed quite surprised and a little disconcerted by the invitation—just as he seemed to be when I asked him to do the pool and fountain.

He said he would like to come if he could arrange it—whatever that may mean. So it was left that way.

Do you approve?

It will be wonderful to see you here, moving in the garden, standing out yonder on the lawn!—Steve, herself, in her own actual and matchless person!—Steve in the flesh, here under the green old trees of Runner's Rest.... Sometimes when I am thinking of you—and I think of practically nothing else!—I seem to see you as you were when last here—a girl in ribbons and white, dancing over the lawn with her chestnut hair flying; or down by the river at the foot of the lawn, wading bare-legged, fussing and poking about among the stones; or lying full-length on the grass under the trees, reading "Quentin Durward"—do you remember? And I used to take you trout-

fishing to that mysterious Dunbar Brook up in the forest, where the rush of ice-cold waters and the spray clouding the huge round boulders always awed you and made you the slightest bit uneasy.

And do you remember the brown pools behind those boulders, where you cautiously dropped your line; and the sudden scurry of a black shadow in the pool—the swift tug, the jerk and spatter as you flung a speckled trout skyward in mingled joy and consternation?

Runner's Rest has not changed. House and barns need paint; the garden requires your soft white hands to caress it into charming discipline; the house needs you; the lawns are empty without you; the noise of the river rippling on the shoals sounds lonely. The whole place needs you, Steve, to make it logical. And so do I. Because all this has no meaning unless the soul of it shows through.

When I am perplexed, restless, impatient, unhappy, I try to remember that you have given me a bit of your heart; that you realize you have mine entire—every atom of my love, my devotion.... There must be some way for us.... I don't know what way, because you have thought it necessary to leave me blind. But I shall never give you up—unless you find that you care more for another man.

And now to answer what you have said concerning you and me. I suppose I ought to touch what is, theoretically, another man's. Yet, you do not belong to him. And you have begun to fall a little in love with me, haven't you? And in this incomprehensible pact it was agreed that you retain your liberty until you came to final decision within two years.

I don't understand it; I can't feel that, under the strange circumstances, I am unfair to you or to this strange and unexplained enigma named Oswald Grismer.

As for my attitude toward him, I hope I am free of the lesser jealousy and resentments. I will not allow myself to brood or cherish unworthy malice. I am trying to accept him, with all his evident and unusual qualities, as a man I've got to fight and a man I can't help liking when I let myself judge him honestly.

As for the flimsy, eccentric, meaningless, yet legal tie which links you to him, I care nothing about it. It's got to be broken ultimately—if one can break a shadow without substance.

How to do it without your aid, without knowledge of the facts, without causing you distress for some reason not explained, I don't know. But sooner or later I shall have to know. Because all this, if I brood on it, seems a nightmare—an unreal dream where I struggle, fettered, blindfolded, against the unseen and unknown, striving to win my way through to you.

That is about all I have to say, Steve.

Oswald has just come in with his drawings, to find me writing to you. He seems very cheerful. His design is delightful and quite in keeping with the simplicity of the place—just a big, circular pool made out of native stone, and in the centre a jet around which three stone trout are intertwined under a tumbling spray.

It is charming and will not clash at all with the long, low house with its shutters and dormers and loop-holes, and the little stone forts flanking it.

Telegraph me what day and what train. And tell Helen you and she may bring your maid-of-all-work.

JAMES CLELAND, in love with you.

There was no need of a fire in the library that evening at Runner's Rest. The night was mild; a mist bordered the rushing river and stars glimmered high above it.

Every great tree loomed huge and dark and still, the foliage piled up fantastically against the sky-line. There was an odour of iris in the night; and silence, save for the dull stamping of horses in the stable.

Cleland, deep in an arm-chair on the porch, became aware of Grismer's tall shape materializing from the fog about him.

"It's a wonderful place, Cleland," he said with a graceful, inclusive gesture. "All this sweet, vague mystery—this delicate grey dark appeals to me—satisfies, rests me.... As though this were the abode of the Blessed Shades, and I were of them.... And the rest were ended."

He seated himself near the other and gazed toward the mist out of which the river's muffled roar came to them in ceaseless, ghostly melody.

"Charon waits at every river, they say," he remarked, lighting a cigarette. "I fancy he must employ a canoe down there."

"The Iroquois once did. The war trail crossed there. When they burned Old Deerfield they came this way."

"The name of your quaint and squatty old house is unusual," said Grismer.

"Runner's Rest? Yes, in the Indian wars before the Revolution, the Forest Runners could find food and shelter here. The stone forts defended it and it was never burned."

"You inherited it?"

"Yes. It belonged to a Captain Cleland in those remote days."

There was a long silence. The delicately fresh odour of grey iris became more apparent—a perfume that, somehow, Cleland associated with Stephanie.

Grismer said in a pleasant, listless voice:

"You are a happy man, Cleland."

"Y-yes."

"Here, under the foliage of your forefathers," mused Grismer aloud, "you should rest contented that the honour of an honourable line lies secure in your keeping."

Cleland laughed:

"I don't know how honourable they were, but I've never heard of any actual criminals among them."

"That's a great deal." He dropped one lean, well-shaped hand on the arm of his chair. The cigarette burned between his pendant fingers, spicing the air with its aromatic scent.

"It's a great deal to have a clean family record," he said again. "It is the greatest thing in the world—the most desirable.... The other makes existence superfluous."

"You mean dishonour?"

"Yes. The stain spreads. You can't stop it. It taints the generations that follow. They can't escape."

"That's nonsense," said Cleland. "Because a man had a crook for a forebear he isn't a crook himself."

"No. But the stain is in his heart and brain."

"That's morbid!"

"Maybe.... But, Cleland, there are people whose most intense desire is to be respectable. It is a ruling passion, inherent, unreasoning, vital to their happiness and peace of mind. Did you know that?"

"I suppose I can imagine such a person."

"Yes. I suppose such a person is not normal. In them, hurt pride is more serious than a wound of the flesh. And pride, mortally wounded, means to them mental and finally physical death."

"Such a person is abnormal and predestined to unhappiness," said Cleland impatiently.

"Predestined," repeated Grismer in his pleasant, even voice. "Yes, there's something wrong with them. But they are born so. Nobody knows what a mental hell they endure. Things that others would scarcely notice they shrink from. Their souls are raw, quivering things within them that agonize over a careless slight, that wither under disapproval, that become paralyzed under an affront."

"Their fiercest, deepest, most vital desire is to be welcomed, approved, respected. Without kindness they become deformed; and crippled pride does strange, perverse things to their brain and tongue."

"There are such people, Cleland.... Predestined ... to suffering and to annihilation.... Weaklings ... all heart and unprotected nerves ... passing their brief lives in desperate and grotesque attempts to conceal what they are.... Superfluous people, undesirable ... foredoomed."

He dropped his cigarette upon the drenched grass, where it glimmered an instant and went out.

"Cleland," he said in a singularly gentle voice, "I once told you that I wished you well. You did not understand. Let me put it a little plainer.... Is there anything I can do for you? Is there anything I can refrain from doing which might add to your contentment?"

"That's an odd thing to ask," returned the other.

"No. It is merely friendship speaking—a very deep friendship, if you can understand it."

"You're very kind, Grismer.... I don't know quite how to take it—or how to answer. There is nothing that you can do for me—nothing one man could ask of another——"

"Ask it, all the same."

"I can't."

"Then I'll offer it.... I give up—Stephanie—to you."

The silence lasted a long time. Neither man stirred. Finally Cleland said in an altered voice:

"I can't ask it—unless she does, too. I don't know what to say to you, Grismer, except that no man ever spoke more nobly——"

"*That* is enough. If you really think it, that means everything, Cleland.... And this is my chance to tell you that when I—married her—I never dreamed that it could ever be a question of you.... I don't believe she did, either.... But it has become so. *That is* the question, now.... And so I—step out."

"I—I tell you I can't accept—that way—unless she asks it, too," stammered Cleland.... "After all, it's got to be on a basis of her happiness.... I am not *sure* that her happiness lies in my keeping. I do not know how much she cares for you—how deeply you are engaged in her heart.... I can't find out.... I'm like a blind man involved in a maze!"

"She cares for me," said Grismer in his low, pleasant voice. "We have been intimate in mind—close and responsive, intellectually.... Sentimentally, too. On her part a passionless loyalty to whatever in me she believed appealed to her intelligence and imagination; an emotional solicitude for what she discovered in me that aroused her sympathy——"

He turned and looked at Cleland in the darkness:

"Hers is a tender heart, Cleland. Impulse carries it to extremes. Injustice to another provokes quick action from her; and nothing so sways her as her intense sense of gratitude, unless it be her fear of wounding others.

"I shall have to tell you more, some day. If I do, it will be more than I would do for anybody else alive—the ultimate sacrifice of pride."

He rose and stood gazing out across the mist at a far star above it, glimmering with dimmed brilliancy all alone.

"It couldn't have been," he said, half to himself. "I always knew it. Not that the thought of you ever crossed my mind. I knew it would come somehow. It simply couldn't be."

He turned to Cleland with a sudden laugh that sounded light and natural:

"This is to be no tragedy. It will disentangle itself easily and simply. I am very sure that she is in love with you. Tell her what I have said to you.... And—good night, old chap."

CHAPTER XXX

Stephanie and Helen arrived, bringing a mountain of baggage and the studio cat—an animal evidently unacquainted with the larger freedom of outdoors, and having no cosmic urge, for when deposited upon the lawn it fled distracted, and remained all day upon a heap of coal in the cellar, glaring immovably upon blandishment.

"Oh!" cried Stephanie, standing on the lawn and quite enchanted by the old place. "It is simply too lovely! It's like a charming doll's house—it's so much smaller than I remember it! Helen, did you ever see such trees! And isn't the garden a dear! Listen to the noise of the river! Did you ever hear anything as refreshing as that endless rippling? Where is Oswald, Jim?"

"He went back to town this morning."

"How mean of him!"

"I tried to keep him," said Cleland, "but he insisted that it was really a matter of business. And, of course, I had nothing more to say."

"Did he have a good time here?" asked Stephanie in a guileless voice. But she looked sideways at him.

"I think so, Steve. He seemed carefree and vastly contented to rove over the place. I planned to go with him after trout, but he preferred to prowling about the lawn or smoke on the porch.... I am glad he came. I have learned to like him very much."

"You're a dear!" she murmured under her breath, her grey eyes fixed on him and full of a gay tenderness tinged with humour. "You always do the right thing, Jim; you *are* right, that's the reason. Do you wonder that I'm quite mad about you?—I, who am all wrong."

"Who says you are all wrong?" he demanded, starting toward her. But she deftly avoided him, putting the sun dial between them. And, leaning on it with both elbows, her face framed in her hands, she let her eyes look gay defiance into his.

"I'm all wrong," she said. "You don't know it, but I am."

"Do you want to be punished?"

She laughed tormentingly, feeling delightfully secure from his demonstrations there on the sunny lawn, with Helen wandering about inspecting the flowers in the garden, and the hired man unloading the luggage at the side-door.

"Come on, Helen!" she called gaily. "We can have a bath; there's plumbing in the house, you know. Where do you suppose that poor cat is hidden?"

Helen came from the garden with a blue pansy between her lips, which she presently drew through Cleland's lapel.

"A bribe, dear friend. I wish to go fishing," she said. "Stephanie has been telling me about her girlhood days here with you, and how you took her on several sacred occasions to a mysterious, dashing stream full of huge bowlders—somewhere deep in the primeval woods——"

"The Dunbar brook, Jim," smiled Stephanie. "Shall we go fishing in the morning? I'm not going to spend all my time fussing with domestic problems."

"The cares of housekeeping sit lightly on her," remarked Helen, as they all strolled toward the porch. "What if the new servants are slack and wasteful? Being a man you wouldn't know; being Steve, she doesn't worry. I see that it's going to devolve on me. Is it possible to run two baths in this house at the same time?"

"Is it?" inquired Stephanie of Cleland. "I forget."

"Yes," he replied, "if you don't draw too much hot water."

"Take yours first, Helen," she said. "I'll sit in this cool library and gossip with Jim for a while."

She unpinning her hat and flung it on a sofa, untied a large box of bonbons, and careless of her charmingly disordered hair, vaulted to a seat on the massive centre table—a favourite perch of hers when a young girl.

Helen lingered to raid the bonbons; Cleland immediately began his pet theme:

"Why do Americans eat candy? Because the nation doesn't know how to cook! The French don't stuff themselves with candy. There isn't, in Paris, a candy-shop to the linear mile! That's because French stomachs, being properly fed with properly and deliciously cooked food, don't crave candy. But in a country noted for its wretched and detestable bread——"

"Oh, you always say that," remarked Stephanie. "Some day I'll go over and find out how much truth there is in your tirades. Meanwhile, I shall consume candy."

"When you go over," he said, "you'll go with me." His voice was low. Helen had strolled into the "best room" and was standing there with a bitter chocolate between her fingers, contemplating the old-time furniture.

"When I go over to Paris," said Stephanie airily, "I shall invite whom I choose."

"Who will it be?"

"Oh, some agreeable young man who isn't too bossy," she returned airily. "Somebody who doesn't try to place me in a day nursery while he goes about and has his fling. But, of course, that doesn't mean you. You've had your fling, haven't you?"

"Not too violently," he said.

"That is your story. But I think I'll investigate it when I go over, and tell you what I've found out when I return."

Helen finished her chocolate and came back. "Where the dickens is that unhappy cat, do you suppose?" she inquired.

"Oh, she'll turn up at dinner-time," Cleland reassured her. "Do you know where your room is, Helen?"

"How should I?" returned that young lady, "—never having been in the house before——"

"Dear, forgive me!" cried Stephanie, jumping from her perch and passing one arm around Helen's shoulders.

They went away together, the former waving a saucy adieu to Cleland behind her back, without turning. She did not return.

So he concluded to get himself into fresh flannels, the late afternoon having grown very warm and promising a close and humid evening.

But when he descended again from his room, he found nobody except the cat, who, sadly disfigured by coal-dust, advanced toward him with amiable intention.

"Very fine, old girl," he said, "but you need a bath, too." So he rang and sent for some butter, dabbed a little on the cat's nose; and in ten seconds she had begun a thorough and minute toilet, greatly to Cleland's edification.

"Keep it up," he said, much interested, watching the pink tongue travelling over the fur, and the velvet paw scrubbing away industriously. "Good old cat! Go to it! Take the whole course—massage, shampoo, manicure, whiskers ironed! By Jove, you're coming out brand new!"

The cat paused to blink at him, sniff for a moment some faint perfume of distant cooking, unnoticed by his less delicate nostrils, then she settled down to the business in hand. And when a cat does that she feels that she is entirely at home.

Not until a maid announced dinner did the two girls appear, both arrayed in that filmy and dainty flyaway apparel suitable only to youth and freshness.

"We had naps," remarked Stephanie shamelessly, and with a slightly malicious humour in her smile, for she knew that Cleland had expected her to return for the ten-minutes' gossip she had suggested.

He shrugged:

"You should see your cat! She's polished within an inch of her life——"

A loud mew by his chair announced the regenerated animal's advent.

Stephanie fed it with odd morsels from time to time, and cautioned the waitress to prepare a banquet for it after dinner.

It was still daylight when they strolled out into the garden. The tree-clad eastern ridge was all ruddy in the rays of a declining sun; the river dull silver save in pools where pearl and pink tints tinged the stiller water. Birds were very noisy, robins gallantly attacking a gay carol which they always found impossible to vary or bring to any convincing musical conclusion; song sparrows sweetly monotonous; an exquisite burst of melody from a rose-grosbeak high on a balsam-tip above the stream; the rushing twitter of chimney swifts sweeping by, mounting, fluttering, sheering through the sunset sky.

Helen, pausing by the sun-dial, read aloud what was chiselled there, black with encrusted lichens.

"Who wrote this?" she asked curiously.

"Some bandit of the back-woods, some wilderness fur trader or ruthless forest runner—with murder on his soul, perhaps. I don't remember now. But my father made a note of the story."

She read the straggling lines again, slowly:

ye Sunne no one would heed Me—
ess Stone;
e Sunne no one could rede Me
l alone.
comrade Sunne, together,
e ye hours
of Love and pleasant weather
th and flowers."

"How odd and quaint," she mused, "—and what straggling, primitive, illiterate letters these are, chiselled here in this black basalt. Fancy that gaunt, grim, buck-skinned runner emerging from the wilderness into this solitary settlement, finding shelter and refreshment; and, in his brief hour of rest and idleness, labouring to leave his record on this old stone!"

"His was a poet's soul," said Cleland, "—but he probably took an Iroquois scalp when unobserved, and skinned living and dead impartially in his fur transactions."

"Some degenerate son of honest English stock, I suppose," nodded Helen. "Yet, he had the simplicity of the Cavalier verse-makers in his gracious heart.... Well, for his sake——"

She laid a June rose on the weather-ravaged dial. "God rest him, anyway!" she added lightly. "There's a devil in every one of us."

"Not in you, darling," cooed Stephanie, enlacing her waist. "If there ever was, he's dead."

"I wonder." ... She glanced deliberately at Cleland, then smiled:

"There was a bully romance I read in extreme youth, in which an old swashbuckler was always exclaiming: 'Courage! The devil is dead!' And since I have realized that I, also, harboured a devil, the memory of that cheery war-cry always puts me on my mettle to slay him.... It's a good fight, Jim," she added, serenely. "But a really good fight is never finished, you know. And it's better to end the story with, 'so they lived to fight happily ever after,' than to announce that the problem is solved, the romance ended for eternity."

In the pink dusk she picked her way over the dewy grass toward the porch, saying carelessly that her ancient bones resented dampness.

Stephanie, resting against the sun-dial, inhaled the sweetness of the iris and spoke of it.

"The flowers are lilac-grey, like your eyes," he said. "The scent expresses you to me—faintly sweet—a young, fresh, delicate odour—*you*—in terms of perfume."

"*Such* a poet! ... But you know one never should touch the petals of an iris.... The indiscreet imprint remains."

"Have I left any imprint?"

"I should say you had! Do you suppose my mind isn't busy most of the time remembering your—imprints?"

"Is it?"

"Does it comfort you to know it? Nobody else ever pawed me."

"A nice way to put it!" he remarked.

She shrugged:

"I don't know how it was I first permitted it—came to endure it——" She lifted her grey eyes deliberately, "—invited it ... because I came to expect it—wish for it——" She bit her lip and made a quick gesture with clenched hand. "Oh, Jim, I'm no good! Here I am married, and as nonchalantly unfaithful to my vows as you care to make me——"

She turned abruptly and walked across the lawn toward the willows that fringed the stream, moving leisurely, pensively, her hands linked behind her back. He rejoined her at the willows and they slowly entered the misty belt of trees together.

"If you knew," she said, "what a futile, irresolute, irresponsible creature I am, you wouldn't waste real love on me. There's nothing to me except feminine restlessness, mental and physical, and it urges, urges, urges me to wander frivolously in pursuit of God knows what—I don't! But always my mind is a traveller impatient to go a-gypsying, and my feet beat the devil's tattoo——"

She sprang from the pebbles to a flat river stone projecting from the shore and stood poised, looking out across the rushing water at the mist curling there along the crests of little hurrying waves. A firefly drifted through it; above, unseen, night-hawks called persistently. She turned her head toward him expectantly.

There was room enough on the rock and he stepped to her side.

"I'm like that water," she said, "making a futile noise in the world, dashing and rippling along without any plan of my own, any destination. When I'm honest with myself, I know that it isn't the intellectual desire for self-expression that keeps me restless; it's merely and solely the instinct to ripple and bubble and dance and flow out under the stars and sunsets and dawns—and go sparkling and swirling and glimmering purposelessly away out into the world at random.... And *that's* all there is to Stephanie Quest!—if you really desire to know—you very romantic and foolish boy, who think yourself in love with her!"

She looked up and laughed at his sober face.

"Dear novelist," she said, "it's common realism, not romantic fiction, that has *us* in its clutches. We're caught by the commonplace. If life were only like one of your novels, with some definite beginning, an artistic plot full of action running toward a properly planned climax!—but it isn't! It begins in the middle and ends nowhere. And here's another trouble with real life; there aren't any villains. And that's fatal to me as your heroine, Jim, for I can't be one unless I'm furnished with a foil."

"Steve," he said, "if you are not everything that my mind and heart believe you to be, the time is past when it makes any difference to me what you are."

She laughed:

"Oh, Jim, is it really as serious as that? Can you stand for a mindless, purposeless girl of unmoral and nomadic proclivities who really hasn't a single gift—no self to express, no creative or interpretive talent—with nothing but an inordinate, unquiet curiosity to find out everything there is to find out—a mental gypsy, lazy, self-indulgent, pleasure-loving, irresponsible——"

He began to laugh:

"All that is covered by one word—'intelligent,'" he said. "You're just human, with a healthy intellect and normal inclinations."

"Oh, dear, you're so dreadfully wrong. I'm a fraud—nice to look at and to stroll with——"

She turned and stepped across to the pebbled shore. He followed. She bent her head and, not looking at him, drew his arm around her waist and held it there with one hand across his.

"I'm desperately in love," she said, "but I'm a sham—agreeable to caress, pliant, an apt pupil—pretty material for a sweetheart, Jim—but for nothing more important." ... They walked slowly along the shore path down stream under the silver willows, his arm enlacing her supple figure, her slow, deliberate steps in rhythm with his.

After a while he said in a low voice:

"Dear, you and I have already come a long way on the blossoming path together. I believe it is written that we travel it together to the end. Don't you want me *always*, Steve?"

"Yes," she sighed, pressing her hand over his at her waist. "I do want you, always.... But, Jim—I'm not what you think me. I ran rather wild while you were away. Liberty went to my empty head. I didn't seem to care what I did. The very devils seemed to be in my heels and they carried me everywhere at random——"

"Nonsense!"

"Oh, they did! They landed me in a dreadful pickle. You know they did. And now here I am, married, and falling more desperately in love every minute with the other man. *You* can't really love such a fool of a girl!"

"It makes no difference," he said, "I can't go on alone, now."

She pressed her cheek against his shoulder:

"You need not. You can always have me when you wish."

"You mean—just this way?"

"Yes.... How else——" She looked up at him; he suddenly stopped in the path, her next step brought her around facing him, where she halted, encircled by his arm. After a moment's silence, she rested her clasped hands on his shoulder, looking very seriously into his eyes.

"How else?" she repeated in a half-whisper.

"Divorce."

"No, dear."

"Either that or—we can go away somewhere—together——"

The dryness of his throat checked him, and her clear eyes looked him through and through.

"Either you or I," he said, "have got to tell Oswald how matters——"

"We can't, Jim."

"Tell him," he continued, "that we are in love with each other and need to marry——"

"Oh, Jim—my dear—dearest, I can't do that!"

"It's true, isn't it?" he demanded.

She did not answer for a while. Then she unclasped his hands, which had been resting on his shoulder, and slipped one arm around his neck:

"Yes, it is true; I want to marry you. But I can't.... So—so won't this way do?" she said. "You can always have me this way."

He kissed her lifted lips.

"No, it won't do, Steve. I want all that you are, all that you have to give the man you love and marry, all that the future holds of beauty and of mystery for us both.... I want a home with you, Steve; I want every minute of life with you, waking and sleeping.... I love you, Steve.... And because I do love you I dare tell you that I am falling in love with our future, too—in love with the very thought of—your children, Steve.... Dear, I think that I am like my father. I love only once. And once in love, there is nothing else for me; no other woman, no recompense if you fail me, no cure for me."

They both were deadly serious now; his face was quiet but set in firm and sober lines; she had lost much of her colour, so that the grey eyes with their dark lashes seemed unusually large.

"*I can't* marry you," she said, drawing his head nearer. "Do you think for one moment that I would deny you anything you asked of me if it were in my power to give?"

"Will you not tell me why?"

"I'm not free to tell you.... Oh, Jim! I adore you—I do love you so—so deeply. I'm married. I'm sorry I'm married. But I can't help it—I can't get out of it—it scares me even to think of trying——"

"What hold has that man——"

"No hold. There's something else—something sad, terrible——"

"I'll take you, anyway," he said in a low, tense voice. "He will have his remedy."

"How, Jim? Do you mean that you wish me to defy opinion with you? You wouldn't let me do that, would you, dear? I'd do it if you asked, but you wouldn't let me, would you?"

"No." He had lost his head for a moment; that was all; and the ugly threat had been wrenched out of him in the confusion of a tortured mind struggling against it knew not what.

"Jim," she asked under her breath, "would you really *let* me?"

"No," he said savagely.

"I knew you wouldn't."

Her arm slipped from his neck and again she clasped both slender hands, rested them on his shoulder, and laid her cheek against them.

"It wouldn't help me out of this pickle if we misbehaved," she said thoughtfully. "It wouldn't solve the problem.... I suppose you've taken me seriously as an apostle of that new liberty which ignores irregularities—doesn't admit them to be irregular. That's why you said what you did say, I fancy. I've talked enough modern foolishness to have you think me quite emancipated—quite indifferent to the old social order, the old code of morals, the old dogmas, the ancient and orthodox laws of community and individual conduct.... Haven't you supposed me quite capable of sauntering away unconventionally with the man I love, after the ironical and casual spectacle of marriage which I have afforded you?"

"I don't know," he said bitterly. "I don't know what I have thought.... There will never be anybody except you. If I lose you I lose the world. But between you and me there is a deeper tie than anything less than marriage could sanction. We couldn't ever do that, Steve—let the world go hang while we gave it an extra kick for each other's sakes."

"Because," she whispered, "dad's roof was ours. For his honour, if not for our own, we could not affront the world, dear.... Not that I don't love you enough!" she added almost fiercely. "I do love you enough! I don't care whether you know it. Nothing would matter—if there were no other way—and if I were free to take the only way that offered. Do you suppose I'd hesitate if it lay between taking that way and losing you?"

She turned and began to pace the path excitedly, cheeks flushed and hands clenching and unclenching.

"What do I care about myself!" she said. She snapped her fingers: "I don't care *that*, Jim, when your happiness is at stake! I'd go to you, go with you, love you, face the world undaunted. I care nothing about myself. I know myself! What am I? *You* know!"

She came up close to him, her face afire, her grey eyes brilliant.

"You know what I am," she repeated. "You and dad did everything to make me like yourselves. You took me out of the gutter——"

"Steve!"

"You took me out of the gutter!" she repeated excitedly. "You cleaned the filth from me, gave me shelter, love;—you educated me, made me possible, strove to eradicate the unworthy instincts and inclinations which I might have inherited. My aunt told me. I know what dad did for me! Why shouldn't I adore the memory of your father? Why shouldn't I love his son? I do. I always have. I didn't dream that you ever could offer me a greater love. But when I understood that it was true—when I realized

that it was really love, then I stepped into your arms because you held them out to me—because you were your father's son whom I had loved passionately all my life in one way, and was willing to learn to love in any way you asked of me—Jim!—my brother—my lover——"

She flung herself into his arms, choking, clinging to him, struggling to control her voice:

"I am nothing—I am nothing," she sobbed passionately. "Why should not all my gratitude and loyalty be for your father's son? What is so terrible to me is that I can't give myself! That I can't throw myself at your feet for life. To marry you would be too heavenly wonderful! Or, to snap my fingers in the world's face for your sake—dearest—that would be so little to do for you—so easy.

"But I can't. Your father—dad—would know it. And then the world would blame him for ever harbouring a gutter-waif——"

"Steve, dearest——"

"Oh, Jim," she stammered, "I haven't even told you how those inherited traits have raised the deuce with me. I've got in me all the low instincts, all the indolence, the selfish laziness, the haphazard, irresponsible, devil-may-care traits of the man who was my own father!"

"Steve——!"

"Let me tell you! I've got to tell you. I can't keep it any longer. It was something in Oswald that appealed to that gypsy side of me—awoke it, I think. The first time I ever saw him, as a boy, and under disagreeable circumstances, I felt an odd inclination for him. He was *like* me, and I sensed it! I told you that once. It's true. Something in him appealed to the vagabond recklessness and irresponsibility latent in me—the tendency to wander, the indolent desire to drift and explore pleasant places.... After you went abroad I met him. I wrote you about it. I liked him. He fascinated me. There was something in common—something common in common between us.... I went to his studio, at first with Helen, and also when others were there. Then I went alone. I didn't care, knowing there was really no harm in going, and also being at the age when defiance of convention is more or less attractive to every girl.

"He was fascinating. He was plainly in love with me. But that means nothing to a girl except the subtle excitement and flattery of the fact. But he was what I wanted—a fellow vagabond!

"Every time I came into town I went to his studio. My aunt had no idea what I was up to. And we did have such good times, Jim!—you see he was successful then, and he had a wonderful studio—and a car—and we ran out into the country and then returned to take tea in his studio.... And, Jim, it was all right—but it was not good for me."

She clasped his arm with both of hers and rested her head on his shoulder; and went on talking in a steadier and more subdued voice:

"I didn't write you about it; I was very sure you wouldn't approve. And my head was stuffed full of modernism and liberty and urge and the necessity for self-expression. I felt that I had a perfect right to enjoy myself.... And then came trouble. It always does.... Oswald's father, Chiltern Grismer, came to the hospital one day, terribly wrought up and looking ghastly.

"My aunt had gone to New York to consult a specialist, but he asked for me, and I came down to the private reception room. I was a graduate nurse then. Oh, Jim!—it was quite dreadful. He seemed to be scared until he saw that I was. Then he was fearfully harsh with me. He told me that my aunt was about to begin suit against him to recover some money—a great deal of money—which my aunt pretended I should have inherited from my grandmother, Mr. Grismer's sister.

"He said we were two adventuresses and that he would expose me and my unhappy origin—all that horror of my childhood——"

A sob checked her; she rested in his arms, breathing fast and irregularly; then, recovering self-control:

"I was bewildered. I told him I didn't want his money. But there was in his eyes a terror which I could see there even when he was upbraiding and threatening me most violently. I didn't know what to do; I wanted to go back to my ward, but he followed me and held the door closed, and I had to listen to the terrible, shameful things he said about my mother's mother and my own mother and myself.... Well—just as he was about to leave, my aunt entered.... I was in tears, and Mr. Grismer's face was all twisted and contorted with rage, as I thought; but it remained so, white and distorted, as though something had broken and he couldn't recover the mobility of his features. I heard what my aunt said to him—I didn't want to hear it. I cried out, protesting that I didn't wish any of his money.... He went away with his face all twisted...."

"What did your aunt say to him?"

"I can't tell you, dear. I am not at liberty to tell you.... And after all, it doesn't matter.... He died—suddenly—a week later.... My aunt was ill at the time and I was with her.... A letter was handed to her by an orderly. It was from Mr. Grismer.... From a dead man! What she read in it seemed to be a terrific shock to her. She was sick and weak, but she got out of bed and telephoned to her attorneys in New York.... I was frightened.... It was a most dreadful night for us both.... And ... and my aunt died of it, I think—the shock and her illness combined.... She died a week later.... I took our studio with Helen.... I saw Oswald every day. He had inherited a great deal of money. We went about.... And, Jim, the very devil was in me to roam everywhere with him and see things and explore the part of the world we could cover in his touring car. All the gypsy instinct born in me, all the tendency to irresponsible wandering and idle pleasure suddenly seemed to develop and demand satisfaction.... Oswald was a dear. He was in love with me; I knew it. He didn't want to go on those escapades with me; but I bullied him into it.... And it got to a point beyond all bounds; the more recklessly we went about the keener my delight in risking everything for the sake of

unconventional amusement. Twice we were caught out so far from New York that he had to drive all night to get into town. And then, what was to be expected happened: our car broke down when it meant a night away from the studio with Oswald. And the very deuce was to pay, too, for in the Ten Eyck Hotel at Albany we ran into friends—girls I knew in school and their parents—friends of dad's!

"Oh, Jim, I was panic-stricken. We *had* to stay there, too. I—there was nothing to do but present Oswald as my husband.... That was a terrible night. We had two rooms and a connecting parlour. We talked it over; I cried most of the time. Then I wrote out that cablegram to you.... Oh, Jim, he is a dear. You don't know him as I do. He knew I didn't love him and he was in love with me.... Well, we had to do something.

"He went out to the Fort Orange Club and got a man he knew. Then, with this man as witness, we told each other that we'd marry each other.... Then Oswald went away with his friend and I didn't see him again until next day, when he called for me with the car.... And that is all there was of my marriage.... And now," she sobbed, "I'm in love with you and I—I——" She broke down hopelessly. He drew her close to him, holding her tightly.

"There is m-more," she faltered, "but I c-can't tell it. It's c-confidential—a matter of honour. I want to be what dad and you expect of me. I do want to be honourable. That is why I can't tell you another person's secret.... It would be dishonourable. And even if I told you, I'd be afraid to ask him for my freedom——"

"You mean he would not let you divorce him?"

"Oh, no, I *don't* mean that! That is the terrible part of it! He would give me my freedom. But I don't want it—that way—not on the—not on such terms——"

They walked slowly toward the house together, she leaning on him as though very tired. Ahead of them a few fireflies sparkled. The rushing roar of the river was in their ears all the way to the house.

Helen had retired, leaving a note for them on the library table: Forgive me, but I've yawned my head off—not because you two lunatics are out stargazing, but because I'm in my right mind and healthily fatigued. Put the cat out before you lock up!

H.

Stephanie laughed, and they hunted up the cat, discovered her asleep in the best room, and bore her out to the veranda. Then Cleland locked up while Stephanie waited for him. Her tears had dried. She was a trifle pale and languid in her movements, but so lovely that Cleland, already hopelessly in love with her, fell deeper as he looked at her in this pale and unfamiliar phase.

Her grey eyes returned his adoration sweetly, pensively humorous:

"I'm in rags, emotionally," she said. "This loving a young man is a disturbing business to a girl who's just learned how.... Are you coming upstairs?"

"I suppose so."

"You'll sleep, of course?"

"Probably not a wink, Steve."

"I wonder if I shall."

They ascended the old staircase together in silence. At her door she held out her hand; he kissed it, released the fingers, but they closed around his and she drew him to her.

"What *shall* I do?" she said. "Tell me?"

"I don't know, dearest. There seems to be nothing you can do for us."

She bent her head thoughtfully.

"Anything that dishonours me would dishonour you and dad, wouldn't it, Jim?"

"Yes."

She nodded.

"You understand, don't you? I count myself as nothing. Only you count, Jim. But I can't marry you. And I can't go to you otherwise without betraying both dad and you. It isn't a question of my being married and of loving you enough to disregard it. I do. But you and dad require more than that of the girl you made one of your own race. I am loyal to what you both expect of me.... Good night, dear.... There doesn't seem to be any way I can make you happy. The only way I can show my love and gratitude to dad and you is to retain your respect ... by being unkind—Jim—my dearest—dearest——"

She closed her eyes and gave him her lips, slipped swiftly out of his arms and into her room.

"Oh, I'm desperately in love," she said, shaking her head at him as she slowly closed the door. "I'm going to get very, very little sleep, I fear.... Jim?"

"Yes."

"You know," she said, "Helen is a charming, clever, talented, beautiful girl. If you are afraid my behaviour is going to make you unhappy——"

"Steve, are you crazy?"

"Couldn't you fall in love with her?"

"Do you want me to try?"

There was a silence, then Stephanie shook her head and gently closed her door.

CHAPTER XXXI

In July Stephanie asked Harry Belter and his wife to spend a week at Runner's Rest. They arrived, the husband a vastly modified edition of his former boisterous, careless, assertive self—a subdued young man now, who haunted his wife with edifying assiduity, moving when she moved, sitting when she sat, tagging faithfully at her dainty heels as though a common mind originated their every inclination.

Philip Grayson, who had been asked with them, told Helen that the Belters had bored him horribly on the journey up.

"You know," he said, "Harry Belter used to be at least amusing, and Marie Cliff was certainly a sparkling companion. But they seem to have no conversation except

for each other, no interests outside of each other, and if a fellow ventures to make a remark they either don't listen or they politely make an effort to notice him."

"You can't blame them," smiled Helen, "after three years of estrangement, and in love with each other all the while."

She was seated under a tree on the edge of the woods, half way up the western slope behind Runner's Rest. Grayson lay among the ferns at her feet. The day had turned hot, but up there in the transparent green shadows of the woods a slight breeze was stirring.

"Estranged all that time, and yet in love," repeated Helen, sentimentally, spreading out a fern frond on her knees and smoothing it. "Do you wonder that they lose no time together?"

Grayson, sprawling on his stomach, his handsome face framed in both hands, emitted a scornful laugh.

"You're very tender-hearted, theoretically," he said.

The girl looked up, smiled:

"Theoretically?" she inquired. "What do you mean, Phil?"

"What I say. Theoretically you are tender-hearted, sympathetic, susceptible. But practically——" His short laugh was ironical.

"Practically—what?" demanded the girl, flushing.

"Practically, you're just practical, Helen. You're nice to everybody, impartially; you go about your sculpture with the cheerful certainty of genius; nothing ever disconcerts you; you are always the cool, freshly gowned, charmingly poised embodiment of everything lovely and desirable—wonderful to look at, engaging and winsome to talk to—and—and all marble inside!"

"Phil! You unpleasant wretch!"

"Therefore," he said deliberately, "when you sentimentalize over the Belters and how they loved each other madly for several years after having bounced each other, your enthusiasm leaves me incredulous."

"The trouble with every man is this," she said; "any girl who doesn't fall in love with him is heartless—all marble inside—merely because she doesn't flop when he expects it. He gives that girl no credit for warm humanity unless she lavishes it on him. If she doesn't, she's an iceberg and he sticks that label on her for life."

Grayson sat up among the ferns and gathered his legs under him:

"It isn't because you don't care for me," he said, "but I tell you, Helen, you're too complete in yourself to fall in love."

"Self-satisfied? Thanks!" But she still did not believe he meant it.

"You are conscious of your self-sufficiency," he said coolly. "You are beautiful to look at, but your mind controls your heart; you do with your heart what you choose to do." He added, half to himself: "It would be wonderful if you ever let it go. But you're far too practical and complacent to do that."

"Let what go?"

"Your heart. You really have one, you know."

The pink tint of rising indignation still lingered on her cheeks; she looked at this presumptuous young man with speculative brown eyes, realizing that for the first time in his three years' sweet-tempered courtship he had said something unpleasantly blunt and virile to her—unacceptable because of the raw truth in it.

This was not like Phil Grayson—this sweet-tempered, gentle, good-looking writer of a literature which might be included under the term of *belles lettres*—this ornamental young fellow whose agreeable devotion she had come to take for granted—whose rare poems pleased her critical taste and flattered it when she saw them printed in the most exclusive of periodicals and hailed effusively by the subtlest of critics.

"Phil," she said, her brown eyes resting on him with a curiosity not free from irritation, "is this really what you think I am—after all these years of friendship?"

"It really is, Helen."

Into her hurt face came the pink tint of wrath again; but she sat quite still, her head lowered, pulling fronds from the fern on her lap.

"I'm sorry if you're offended," he said cheerfully, and lighted a cigarette.

Helen's troubled face cooled; she tore tiny shreds of living green from the fern; her remote eyes rested on him, on the blue hills across the valley, on the river below them, sparkling under the July sun.

Down there, Marie Belter, with her red parasol, was sauntering across the pasture, and Harry paddled faithfully beside her, fanning his features with his straw hat.

"There goes Marie and Fido," said Grayson, laughing. "Good Lord! After all, it's a dog's life at any angle you care to view it."

"*What* is a dog's life?" inquired Helen crisply.

"Marriage, dear child."

"OK. Do you view it that way?"

"I do.... But we dogs were invented for it. After all, I suppose we prefer to live our dogs' lives to any other—we human Fidos——"

"Phil! You never before gave me any reason to believe you a cynical materialist. And you have been very unjust and disagreeable to me. Do you know it?"

"I'm tired of running at your heels, I suppose.... A dog knows when he's welcome.... After a while the lack of mutual sympathy gets on his nerves, and he strays by the roadside.... And sometimes, if lonely, the owner of another pair of heels will look behind her and find him paddling along.... That's the life of the dog, Helen—with exceptions like that cur of Bill Sykes. But the great majority of pups won't stay where they're lonely for such love as they offer. For your dog must have love.... The love of the human god he worships. Or of some other god."

He laughed lightly:

"And I, who worship a goddess for her divine genius and her loveliness—I have trotted at her heels a long, long time, Helen, and I'm just beginning to understand, in my dog's heart, that my divinity does not want me."

"I—I *do* want you!"

"No, you don't. You haven't enough emotion in you to want anybody. You're too complete, too self-satisfied, too intellectual, too clever to understand a heart's desire—the swift, unselfish, unfeigned, uncalculated passion that makes us human. There's nothing to you but intellect and beauty. And I'm fed up!"

The girl rose, flushed and disconcerted by his brutality. Grayson got up, bland, imperturbable, accepting her departure pleasantly.

She meant to go back all alone down the hillside; that was evident in her manner, in her furious calmness, in her ignoring the tiny handkerchief which he recovered from the moss and presented.

She was far too angry to speak. He stood under the trees and watched her as she descended the hillside toward the house, just visible below.

Down she went through the heated wild grass and ferns, stepping daintily over gulleys, avoiding jutting rocks, down, ever down hill, receding farther and farther from his view until, a long way below him, he saw her halt, a tiny, distant figure shining white and motionless in the sun.

He waited for her to move on again out of sight. She did not.

After a long while he saw her lift one arm and beckon him.

"Am I a Fido?" he asked himself. "Damn it, I believe I am." And he started leisurely down hill.

When he joined her where she stood waiting, her brown eyes avoided his glance and the colour in her cheeks grew brighter.

"If you believe," she said, "that my mind controls my heart, why don't you make it an intellectual argument with me? Why not appeal to my reason? Because I—I am intelligent enough to be open to conviction—if your logic proves sounder than—mine."

"I can't make love to you logically. Love doesn't admit of it."

"Love *is* logical—or it's piffle!"

"I don't know how to make intellectual love."

"You'd better learn."

"Could you give me a tip?" he asked timidly.

Then Helen threw back her pretty head and began to laugh with that irresponsible, unfeigned, full-throated and human laughter that characterized the primitive girl when her naïve sense of humour was stirred to response by her lover of the cave.

For Helen had caught a glimpse of this modern young caveman's intellectual brutality and bad temper for the first time in her life, and it was a vital revelation to the girl.

He had whacked her, verbally, violently, until, in her infuriated astonishment, it was made plain to her that there was much more to him than she had ever reckoned with. He had hurt her pride, dreadfully, he had banged her character about without mercy—handled her with a disdainful vigour and virility that opened her complacent brown eyes to a new vision and a new interpretation of man.

"Phil," she murmured, "do you realize that you were positively common in what you said to me up on that hill?"

"I know I was."

"You told me——" a slight shudder passed over her and he felt it in the shoulder that touched his—"you told me that you—you were 'fed up!'"

"I *was*!"

"And you, a poet—a man with an almost divine facility of language——"

"Sure," he said, grinning; "I'm artist enough to know the value of vulgarity. It gives a wonderful punch, Helen—once in a lifetime."

"Oh, Phil! You horrify me. I didn't understand that you are just a plain, every-day, bad-tempered, brutal, selfish and violent man——"

"Dearest, I am! And thank God you are woman enough to stand for it.... Are you?"

They had reached the house and were standing on the porch now, her hands restlessly twisting in his sun-browed grasp, her pretty head averted, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Are you?" he repeated sternly.

"Am I, what? Oh, Phil, you hurt me—my rings hurt——"

"Then don't twist your fingers. And answer me; are you woman enough to stand for the sort of everyday human man that you say I am? *Are* you?"

She said something under her breath.

"Did you say yes?" he demanded.

She nodded, not looking at him.

Before he could kiss her she slid out of his grasp with a low exclamation of warning, and, looking around, he beheld the Belters, arm-in-arm, approaching across the lawn.

"Fido!" he muttered, "damn!" And he followed his divinity into the house.

CHAPTER XXXII

Helen kept her own council as long as the Belters remained at Runner's Rest, but as soon as they had departed she went to Stephanie's room and made a clean breast of it.

"What on earth do you suppose has happened to me, Steve?" she demanded, standing by the day-bed on which Stephanie was stretched out reading a novel and absorbing chocolates.

"What?" asked Stephanie, lifting her grey eyes.

"Well, there's the very deuce to pay with Phil Grayson. He isn't a bit nice to me. He isn't like himself. He bullies me."

"Why do you let him?"

"I—don't know. I resent it. He's entirely too bossy. He's taken possession of me and he behaves abominably."

"Sentimentally?"

"Yes."

"But you don't have to endure it!" exclaimed Stephanie, astonished.

"If I don't submit," said Helen, "I shall lose him. He'll go away. He says he will."

"Well, do you care what Phil Grayson does?" demanded Stephanie, amazed.

Then that intellectual, capable, intelligent and superbly healthy girl flopped down on her knees by Stephanie's day-bed and, laying her lovely head on the pillow, began to whimper.

"I—I don't know what's the matter with me," she stammered, "but my mind is full of that wretched man every minute of the day and half of the night. He is absolutely shameless; he makes love to me t-tyranically. It's impossible for a girl to keep her reserve—her d-dignity with a m-man who takes her into his arms and k-kisses her whenever he chooses——"

"What!" cried Stephanie, sitting bolt upright and staring at her friend. "Do you mean to tell me that Phil is *that* sort of man?"

"I didn't think so, either," explained Helen. "I've known him for ages. He's been so considerate and attentive and sweet to me—so gentle and self-effacing. I thought I could c-count on him. But a girl can't tell anything about a man—even when he's been an old and trusted friend of years."

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Stephanie, blankly.

"Do? I suppose I'll go on doing what he wishes. I suppose I'll marry him. It looks that way. I don't seem to have any will power.... It's such an odd sensation to be bullied."

"Are you in love with him?"

"I don't know. I suppose I am. It makes me simply furious.... But I guess I am, Steve.... If he'd behaved as agreeably and pleasantly as he always had behaved I should never have cared for him except in a friendly way. He always has paid his courtship to me in the nicest way.... It was quite ideal, not disturbing, and we

exchanged intellectual views quite happily and contentedly.... And then, suddenly he—he flew into a most frightful temper and he told me that he was '*fed up*!' My dear, can you imagine my rage and amazement? ... And then he told me what he thought of me—oh, Steve!—the most horrid things ever said about a girl he said to me! I was breathless! I felt as though he had beaten me and dragged me about by my hair.... And then—I don't know how it happened—but I w-waited for him, and we walked home together, and I understood him to say that I'd got to love him if I were a human girl.... And I am.... So—it's that way now with us.... And when I think about it I am still bewildered and furious with him.... But I don't dare let him go.... There *are* other girls, you know."

Stephanie lay very still. Helen rose presently, turned and walked slowly to the door. There she paused for a moment, then turned. And Stephanie saw in her brown eyes an expression entirely new to her.

"Helen! You *are* in love with him!" she said.

"I'm afraid I am.... Anyway, I shall not let him go until I am quite certain.... It's abominable that he should have made of me a thing with which I never have had any patience—a girl whose heart has run away with her senses. And *that's* what he has done to me, I'm afraid."

Stephanie suddenly flushed:

"If he has," she said, "you ought to be glad! You are free to marry him if you love him, and you ought to thank God for the privilege."

"Yes. But what is marriage going to do to my work? I never meant to marry. I've been afraid to. What happens to a girl's creative work if her heart is full of something else—full of her lover—her husband—children, perhaps—new duties, new cares! ... I didn't *want* to love this man. I loved my work. It took all of me. It's the very devil to have a thing like this happen. It scares me. I can't think of my work now. It bores me to recollect it. My mind and heart are full of this man!—there's no room in it for anything else.... What is this going to do to my career? That's what frightens me to think about.... And I can't give up sculpture, and I *won't* give up Phil! Oh, Steve, it's the very deuce of a mess—it really is. And you lie there eating chocolates and reading piffle, and you calmly tell me to thank God that I am free to marry!"

Stephanie's clear grey eyes regarded her:

"If you're any good," she said, "your career will begin from the moment you fell in love. Love clears the mind wonderfully. You learn a lot about yourself when you fall in love.... I learned that I had no talent, nothing to express. That's what love has done for me. But you will learn what genius really means."

Helen came slowly back to where the girl was lying.

"You *are* in love, then," she said gently. "I was afraid."

"I am afraid, too."

They looked at each other in silence.

"Do you ever mean to live with Oswald?" asked Helen.

"Not if I can avoid it."

"Can you not?"

"Yes, I can avoid it—unless the price of immunity is too heavy."

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't. Neither does Jim. It's a rather ghastly situation."

"You are not at liberty to explain it, are you?"

"No."

Helen bent and laid her hand on Stephanie's hair:

"I'm sorry. I knew you were falling in love. There seemed to be no help for either of you."

"No, no help. One can't help one's heart's inclinations. The only thing we can control is our behaviour."

"Steve, are you unhappy?"

"I'm beginning to be.... I didn't think I would be—it's so wonderful.... But the seriousness of love reveals itself sooner or later.... A girl begins to understand.... All we want is to give, if we're in love.... It's tragic when we can't." She turned her face abruptly and laid one arm across her eyes.

Helen sank to her knees again and laid her cool face against Stephanie's flushed cheek.

"Darling," she said, "there must be some way for you."

"No honourable way."

"But that marriage is a farce."

"Yes. I made it so.... But Oswald cares for me."

"Still?"

"Yes.... He is a very wonderful, generous, unhappy man; proud, deeply sensitive, tender-hearted, and loyal. I can not sacrifice him. He has done too much for my sake.... And I promised——"

"What?"

"I promised him to give myself as long a time as he wished to learn whether I could ever come to love him."

"Does he know you are in love?"

"No."

"What would he do if he knew?"

Stephanie began to tremble:

"I—don't know," she stammered, "—he must never think that I am in love with Jim.... It would be—dreadful—terrible——"

She sat up, covering her face with both hands:

"Don't ask me! Don't talk about it! There are things I can't tell you—things I can't do, no matter what happens to me—no matter whether I am unhappy—whether Jim is——"

"Don't cry, darling. I didn't mean to hurt you——"

"Oh, Helen! Helen! There's something that happened which I can't ever forget. It terrifies me. There's no way out of this marriage for me—there's no way! No way!" she repeated desolately.... "And I'm so deeply in love—so deeply—deeply——"

She flung herself on her face and buried her head in her arms.

"Just let me alone," she sobbed. "I can't talk about it. I—I'm glad you're happy, dear. But please go out, now!"

Helen rose and stood for a moment looking down at the slender figure in its jewelled kimono and its tumbled splendour of chestnut hair. Then she went out very quietly.

On the porch her audacious young man and Cleland were smoking and consulting time-tables, and she gave the former a swift glance which questioned his intentions. He seemed to comprehend, for he said:

"It's Jim. He's been talking to Oswald on the long distance wire, and he's going down to town to see the model that Oswald has made."

"Are *you* going, too?" she asked.

"Not until you do," he said boldly.

Helen blushed furiously and glanced at Cleland, but he had not paid them any attention, apparently, for he rose with an absent air and went into the house.

"Steve!" he called from the foot of the stairs. "I'm going to town to-night, if you don't mind."

There was no answer. He ran lightly up the stairs and glanced through her door, which was partly open. Then he went in.

She did not hear him, nor was she aware of his presence until she felt his questioning hand on her tumbled hair. Then she turned over, looked up into his anxious face, stretched out her arms to him in a sudden passion of loneliness and longing, and drew him convulsively to her breast with a little sob of surrender. And the next instant she had slipped through his arms to the floor, sprung to her feet, and now stood breathing fast and unevenly as he rose, half dazed, to confront her.

"Jim," she said unsteadily, "I had better go back. I'm losing my head here with you—here under dad's roof. Do you hear what I say? I can't trust myself. I can't remain here and tear dad's honour to shreds just because I've gone mad about you.... I'm going back."

"Where?"

"To Oswald."

"What!"

"It's the only safety for us. There's no use. No hope, either. And it's too dangerous—with no outlook, no possible chance that waiting may help us. There's not a ghost of a chance that we ever can marry. That is the real peril for us.... So—I'll play the game.... I'll go to him now—before it's too late,—before you and I have made each other wretched for life—and before I have something still worse on my conscience!"

"What?"

"My husband's death! He'll kill himself if I let you take me away somewhere."

After a silence he said in a low voice:

"Is *that* what you have been afraid of?"

"Yes."

"You believe he will kill himself if you divorce him?"

"I—I am certain of it."

"Why are you certain?"

"I can't tell you why."

He said coolly:

"Men don't do that sort of thing as a rule. Weak intellects seek that refuge from trouble; but his is not a weak character."

"I won't talk about it," she said. "I've told you more than I ever meant to. Now you know where I stand, what I fear—his death!—if I dishonour dad's memory and go away with you. And if I ask divorce, he will give it to me—and then kill himself. Do you think I could accept even you on such terms as these?"

"No," he said.

He looked at her intently. She stood there very white, now, her grey eyes and the masses of chestnut hair accentuating her pallour.

"All right," he said, "I'll take you to town."

"You need not."

"Won't you let me?"

"Yes, if you wish.... When you go downstairs, tell them to send up my trunks. Tell one of the maids to come."

"You can't go off this way, to-night. You've two guests here," he said in a dull voice.

"You will be here."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Oswald called me on the long distance wire an hour ago. He has asked me to go to town and look at the sketch he has made for the fountain. I said I'd go."

She dropped to the couch and sat there with grey eyes remote, her shoulders, in their jewelled kimono, huddled under her heavy mass of hair.

"Stay here for a while, anyway," he said. "There's no use taking such action until you have thought it over. And such action is not necessary, Steve."

"It is."

"No. There is a much simpler solution for us both. I shall go abroad."

"What!" she exclaimed sharply, lifting her head.

"Of course. Why should you be driven into the arms of a husband you do not love just because you are afraid of what you and I might do? That would be a senseless proceeding, Steve. The thing to do is to rid yourself of me and live your life as you choose."

She laid her head on her hands, pressing her forehead against her clenched fingers.

"That's the only thing to do, I guess," he said in his curiously colourless voice. "I came too late. I'm paying for it. I'll go back to Paris and stay for a while. Time does things to people."

She nodded her bowed head.

"Time," he said, "forges an armour on us all.... I'll wait until mine is well riveted before I return. You're quite right, Steve.... You and I can't go on this way. There would come a time when the intense strain would break us both—break down our resolution and our sense of honour—and we'd go away together—or make each other wretched here.... Because there's no real happiness for you and me without honour, Steve. Some people can do without it. We can't.

"We might come to think we could. We might take the chance. We might repeat the stale old phrase and try to 'count the world well lost.' But there would be no happiness for you and me, Steve. For, to people of our race, happiness is composite. Honesty is part of it; loyalty to ideals is another; the world's respect, the approval of our own hearts, the recognition of our responsibility to the civilization that depends on such as we—all these are part of the only kind of happiness that you and I can understand and experience.... So we must give it up.... And the best way is the way I offer.... Let me go out of your life for a while.... Live your own life as you care to live it.... Time must do whatever else is to be done."

The girl lifted her dishevelled head and looked at him.

"Are you going to-night?"

"Yes."

"You are not coming back?"

"No, dear."

She dropped her head again.

There was a train at four that afternoon. He took a gay and casual leave of Helen and Grayson, where he found them reading together in the library.

"Will you be back to-morrow?" inquired the latter.

"I'm not sure. I may be detained for some time," said Cleland carelessly. And went upstairs.

Stephanie, frightfully pale, came to her door. Her hair was dressed and she was gowned for the afternoon. She tried to speak but no sound came from her colourless lips; and she laid her hands on his shoulders in silence. Their lips scarcely touched before they parted; but their eyes clung desperately.

"Good-bye, dear."

"Good-bye," she whispered.

"You know I love you. You know I shall never love another woman?"

"Try to—forget me, Jim."

"I can't."

"I can't forget you, either.... I'm sorry, dear. I wish you had me.... I'd give you anything, Jim—anything. Don't you know it?"

"Yes."

She laid her head on his breast, rested a moment, then lifted it, not looking at him, and turned slowly back into her room.

It was dark when he arrived in New York. The flaring streets of the city seemed horrible to him.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Washington Square seemed to him a little cooler than the streets to the northward; the white arch, the trees, the splash of water made a difference. But beyond, southward, narrow streets and lanes were heavy with the close, hot odours of the slums—a sickening smell of over-ripe fruit piled on push-carts, the reek of raw fish, of sour malt from saloons—a subtler taint of opium from blind alleys where Chinese signs hung from rusting iron balconies.

Through cracks between drawn curtains behind the window of Grismer's basement studio, light glimmered; and when Cleland pulled the bell-wire in the area he could hear the crazy, cracked bell jangling inside.

Grismer came.

For a second he hesitated behind the iron area gate, then recognizing her visitor opened for him.

They shook hands with a pleasant, commonplace word or two of civility, and walked together through the dark, hot passageway into the lighted basement.

"It's devilish hot," said Grismer. "There's probably a storm brewing over Staten Island."

He looked colourless and worn. There was a dew of perspiration on his forehead, which dampened the thick amber-gold hair. He wore only a gauze undershirt, trousers and slippers, under which his supple, graceful figure was apparent.

"Grismer," said Cleland uneasily, "this cellar is hell in July. Why won't you come up to Runner's Rest for the hot period? You can't do anything here. You can't stand it."

Grismer fished a siphon out of his ice-box and looked around with a questioning smile. "I've some orange juice. Would you like some?"

Cleland nodded and walked over to a revolving table on which the wax model of his fountain stood. Grismer presently came up beside him with both glasses, and he took his with an absent nod, but continued to examine the model in silence.

"Probably you don't care for it," suggested Grismer.

Cleland said slowly:

"You gave me a different idea. I didn't know you were going to do anything like this."

"I'm afraid you are disappointed."

"No.... It's beautiful, Grismer. I hadn't thought that a figure would be possible, considering the character of the place and the very simple and primitive surroundings. But this is in perfect taste and amazingly in accord with everything."

He looked at the slim, naked, sinuous figure—an Indian girl of fifteen drinking out of cupped hands. Wild strawberry vines in full fruit bound her hair, which fell in two clubbed braids to her shoulders. A narrow breadth of faun-skin fell from a wampum girdle to her knees. And, from the thin metal forehead-fillet, the head of a snake reared, displaying every fang.

"It's the Lake-Serpent, isn't it?—the young Oneida girl of the Iroquois legend?" inquired Cleland.

Grismer nodded.

"That's your country," he said. "The Iroquois war-trail passed through your valley and down the river to Charlemont and Old Deerfield. I read up on it. The story of the Lake-Serpent and the Eight Thunders fascinated me. I thought the thing might be done."

"You've done it. It's stunning."

"The water," explained Grismer, "flows out of her hollowed hands, out of the serpent's throat and down each braid of hair, dripping on her shoulders. Her entire body will appear to be all glimmering with a thin skin of running water. I shall use the 'serpent spot' on her forehead like a caste-mark, I think. And what I want to get is an effect from a fine cloud of spray which will steam up from the basin at her feet like the 'cloud on the water' which the legend speaks of. I can get it by an arrangement of very minute orifices through which spray will rush and hang over the water in a sort of rainbow mist. Do you think that would be all right?"

"Of course. It's a masterpiece, Grismer," said the other quietly.

Into Grismer's pale face a slow colour came and spread.

"That's worth living for," he said.

"What?"

"I said that I'm glad I have lived to hear you speak that way of anything I have done," said Grismer with a smile.

"I don't understand why you should care about my opinion," returned Cleland, turning an amused and questioning gaze on the sculptor. "I'm no critic, you know."

"I know," nodded Grismer, with his odd smile. "But your approval means more than any critic has to offer me.... There's an arm-chair over there, if you care to be seated."

Cleland took his glass of iced orange juice with him. Grismer set his on the floor and dropped onto the ragged couch.

"Anybody can point it up now," he said. "It ought to be cast in silver-grey bronze, not burnished—a trifle over life-size."

"You must have worked like the devil to have finished this in such a brief period."

"Oh, I work that way—when I do work.... I've been anxious—worried over what you might think.... I'm satisfied now."

He filled and lighted his pipe, leaned back clasping his well-made arms behind his head.

"Cleland," he said, "it's a strange sensation to feel power within one's self—be conscious of it, certain of it, and deliberately choose not to use it.... And the very liberty of choice is an added power."

Cleland looked up, perplexed. Grismer smiled, and his smile seemed singularly care-free and tranquil:

"Just think," he said, "what the gods *could* have done if they had taken the trouble to bestir themselves! What they did do makes volumes of mythology: what they refrained from doing would continue in the telling through all eternity. What they did betrayed their power," he added, with a whimsical gesture toward his fountain; "but what they refrained from doing interests me, Cleland—fascinates me, arouses my curiosity, my respect, my awe, and my gratitude that they were godlike enough to disdain display—that they were decent enough to leave to the world material to feed its imagination."

Cleland smiled sombrely at Grismer's whimsical humour, but his features settled again into grave, care-worn lines, and his absent gaze rested on nothing. And Grismer's golden eyes studied him.

"It must be pleasant out there in the country," he said casually.

"It's cool. You must go there, Grismer. This place is unendurable. Do go up while Phil Grayson is there."

"Is there anybody else?"

"Helen—and Stephanie," he said, using her name with an effort. "The Belters were there for a week. No doubt Stephanie will ask other people during the summer."

"When do you go back?" asked Grismer quietly.

There was a short silence, then Cleland said in a voice of forced frankness:

"I was about to tell you that I'm going over to Paris for a while. You know how it is—a man grows restless—wants to run over and take a look at the place just to satisfy himself that it's still there." His strained smile remained stamped on his face after his gaze shifted from Grismer's penetrating eyes—unsmiling, golden-deep eyes that seemed to have perceived a rent in him, and were looking through the aperture into the secret places of his mind.

"When are you going, Cleland?"

"Oh, I don't know. Some time this week, if I can get accommodations."

"You go alone?"

"Why—of course!"

"I thought perhaps you might feel that Stephanie ought to see Europe."

"I hadn't—considered——"

He reddened, took a swallow of his orange juice, and, holding the glass, turned his eyes on the wax model.

"How long will you be away?" asked Grismer in his still and singularly agreeable voice.

There was another silence. Then Cleland made a painful effort at careless frankness once more:

"That reminds me, Grismer," he exclaimed. "I can't ever repay you for that fountain, but I can do my damndest with a cheque-book and a fountain pen. I should feel most uncomfortable if I went away leaving that obligation unsettled."

He drew out his cheque-book and fountain pen and smiled resolutely at Grismer, whose dark golden eyes rested on him with an intentness that he could scarcely endure.

"Would you let me give it to you, Cleland?"

"I can't, Grismer.... It's splendid of you."

"I shall not need the money," said Grismer, almost absently, and for an instant his gaze grew vague and remote. Then he turned his head again, where it lay cradled on his clasped hands behind his neck: "You won't let me give it to you, I know. And there's no use telling you that I shall not need the money. You won't believe me.... You won't understand how absolutely meaningless is money to me—just now. Well, then—write in what you care to offer."

"I can't do that, Grismer."

The other smiled and, still smiling, named a figure. And Cleland wrote it out, detached the cheque, started to rise, but Grismer told him to lay it on the table beside his glass of orange juice.

"It's a thing no man can pay for," said Cleland, looking at the model.

Grismer said quietly:

"The heart alone can pay for anything.... A gift without it is a cheque unsigned.... Cleland, I've spoken to you twice since you have returned from abroad—but you have not understood. And there is much unsaid between us. It must be said some day.... There are questions you ought to ask me. I'd see any other man in hell before I'd answer. But I'll answer *you*!"

Cleland turned his eyes, heavy with care, on this man who was speaking.

Grismer said:

"There are three things in the world which I have desired—to stand honourably and well in the eyes of such people as your father and you; to win your personal regard and respect; to win the love of Stephanie Quest."

In the tense silence he struck a match and relighted his pipe. It went out again and grew cold while he was speaking:

"I lost the consideration of such people as you and your father; in fact, I never gained it at all.... And it was like a little death to something inside me.... And as for Stephanie——" He shook his head. "No," he said, "there was no love in her to give me. There is none now. There never will be."

He laid aside his pipe, clasped his hands behind his head once more and dropped one long leg over the other.

"You won't question me. I suppose it's the pride in you, Cleland. But my pride is dead; I cut its throat.... So I'll tell you what you ought to know."

"I always was in love with her, even as a boy—after that single glimpse of her there in the railroad station. It's odd how such things really happen. Your people had no social interest in mine. I shall use a more sinister term: your father held my father in contempt.... So there was no chance for me to know you and Stephanie except as I was thrown with you in school."

He smiled:

"You can never know what a boy suffers who is fiercely proud, who is ready to devote himself soul and body to another boy, and who knows that he is considered inferior.... It drives him to strange perverseness, to illogical excesses—to anything which may conceal the hurt—the raw, quivering heart of a boy.... So we fought with fists. You remember. You remember, too, probably, many things I said and did to intensify your hostility and contempt—like a hurt thing biting at its own wounds——!"

He shrugged:

"Well, you went away. Has Stephanie told you how she and I met?"

"Yes."

"I thought she would tell you," he said tranquilly. "And has she told you about our unwise behaviour—our informal comradeship—reckless escapades?"

"Yes."

Grismer raised his head and looked at him intently.

"And has she related the circumstances of our marriage?" he asked.

"Partly."

Grismer nodded.

"I mean in part. There were many things she refused to speak of, were there not?"

"Yes."

He slowly unclasped his linked fingers and leaned forward on the couch, groping for his pipe. When he found it he slowly knocked the cinders from the bowl, then laid it aside once more.

"Cleland, I'll have to tell where I stood the day that my father—killed himself."

"*What!*"

"Stephanie knew it. There had been a suit pending, threatening him.... For years the fear of such a thing had preyed on his mind.... I never dreamed there was any reason for him to be afraid.... But there was."

He dropped his head and sat for a few moments thinking and playing with his empty pipe. Then:

"Stephanie's aunt was the Nemesis. She became obsessed with the belief that her nephew and later, Stephanie, had suffered wickedly through my father's—conversion of trust funds." He swallowed hard and passed one hand over his eyes: "My father was a defaulter.... That woman's patience was infernal. She never ceased her investigations. She was implacable. And she—got him."

"She was dying when the case was ready. Nobody knew she was mortally ill.... I suppose my father saw disgrace staring him in the face.... He made a last effort to see her. He did see her. Stephanie was there.... Then he went away.... He had not been well. It was an overdose of morphine."

Grismer leaned forward, clasping his hands on his knees and fixing his eyes on space.

"The money that I inherited was considerable," he said in his soft, agreeable voice. "But after I had begun to amuse myself with it, the papers in the suit were sent to me by that dead woman's attorneys. So," he said pleasantly, "I learned for the first time that the money belonged to Stephanie's estate. And, of course, I transferred it to her attorneys at once.... She never told you anything of this?"

"No."

"No," said Grismer thoughtfully, "she couldn't have told you without laying bare my father's disgrace. But that is how I suddenly found myself on my uppers," he continued lightly. "Stephanie came to me in an agony of protest. She is a splendid girl, Cleland. She rather violently refused to touch a penny of the money. You should have heard what she said to her aunt's attorneys—who now represented her. Really, Cleland, there was the devil to pay.... But that was easy. I paid him. Naturally, I couldn't retain a penny.... So it lies there yet, accumulating interest, payable at any time to Stephanie's order.... But she'll never use it.... Nor shall I, Cleland.... God knows who'll get it—some charity, I hope.... After I step out, I think Stephanie will give it to some charity for the use of little children who have missed their childhood—children like herself, Cleland."

After a silence he idly struck a match, watched it burn out, dropped the cinder to the floor:

"There was no question of *you* at that time," said Grismer, lifting his eyes to Cleland's drawn face. "And I was very desperately in love.... There seemed to be hope that Stephanie might care for me.... Then came that reckless escapade at Albany, where she was recognized by some old friends of your father and by schoolmates of her own....

"Cleland, I would gladly have shot myself then, had that been any solution. But there seemed to be only the one solution.... She has told you, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was what was done.... I think she cried all the way back. The Albany Post Road seemed like a road through hell to me. I knew then that Stephanie cared nothing for me in that way; that my place in her life served other purposes.

"I don't know what she thought I expected of her—what duty she believed she owed me. I know now that the very thought of wifedom was abhorrent to her.... But she was game, Cleland! ... What line of reasoning she followed I don't know. Whether my love for her touched her, or some generous impulse of renunciation—some

childish idea of bringing to me again the inheritance which I had forced on her, I don't know.

"But she was game. She came here that night with her suitcase. She was as white as death, could scarcely speak.... I never even touched her hand, Cleland.... She slept there—behind that curtain on the iron bed. I sat here all night long.

"In the morning we talked it over. And with every generous plucky word she uttered I realized that it was hopeless. And do you know—God knows how—but somehow I kept thinking of you, Cleland. And it was like clairvoyance, almost, for I could not drive away the idea that she cared for you, unknowingly, and that when you came back some day she'd find it out."

He rose from the couch and began to pace the studio slowly, his hands in his pockets.

"Cleland," he said, "she meant to play the game. The bed she had made for herself she was ready to lie on.... But I looked into those grey eyes of hers and I knew that it was pity that moved her, square dealing that nerved her, and that already she was suffering agonies to know what you would think of what she had done—done with a man you never liked—the son of a man whom your father held in contempt because—because he considered him—dishonest!"

He halted a pace from where Cleland was sitting:

"I told her to go back to her studio and think it over. She went out.... I did not think of her coming back here.... I was standing in front of that cracked mirror over there.... To get a sure line on my temple.... That's what shattered the glass—when she struck my arm up....

"Well, a man goes to pieces sometimes.... She made me promise to wait two years—said she would try to care for me enough in that time to live with me.... The child was frightened sick. The terror of my ever doing such a—a fool thing remains latent in her brain. I know it. I know it's there. I know, Cleland, that she is in love with you. And that she dare not ask me for her freedom for fear that I shall do some such silly thing."

He began to laugh, quite naturally, without any bitterness at all:

"I tried to make you understand. I told you that I would do anything for you. But you didn't comprehend.... Yet, I meant it. I mean it now. She belongs to you, Cleland. I want you to take her. I wish her to understand that I give her the freedom she's entitled to. That she need not be afraid to take it—need not fear that I might make an ass of myself."

He laughed again, quite gaily:

"No, indeed, I mean to live. I tell you, Cleland, there is no excitement on earth like beating Fate at her own game. There's only one thing——"

After a pause, Cleland looked up into the man's wistful, golden eyes.

"What is it, Grismer?"

"If I could win—your friendship——"

"Good God!" whispered Cleland, rising and offering a hand that shook, "—Do you think I'm worth it, Oswald?"

Their hands met, clasped; a strange light flashed in Grismer's golden eyes.

"Do you mean it, Cleland?"

"With all my heart, old chap.... I don't know what to say to you—except that you're white all through—straighter than I am, Grismer—clean to the soul of you!"

Grismer drew a long, deep breath.

"Thanks," he said. "That's about all I want of life.... Tell Stephanie what you said to me—if you don't mind.... I don't care what others think ... if you and she think me straight."

"Oswald, I tell you you're straighter than I am—stronger. Your thoughts never wavered; you stood steady to punishment, not whimpering. I've had a curb-bit on myself, and I don't know now how long it might have taken me to get it between my teeth and smash things."

Grismer smiled:

"It would have taken two to smash the Cleland traditions. It couldn't have been done—between you and Stephanie.... Are you going back to Runner's Rest to-night?"

"Yes—if you say so," he replied in a low voice.

"I do say so. Call her on the telephone as soon as you leave here. Then take the first train."

"And you? Will you come?"

"Not to-night."

"Will you let us know when you can come, Oswald?"

Grismer picked up a shabby dressing gown from the back of a decrepit chair, and put it on over his undershirt and trousers.

"Sure," he said pleasantly. "I've one or two matters to keep me here. I'll fix them up to-night.... And please make it very plain to Stephanie that I'm taking this affair beautifully and that the last thing I'd do would be to indulge in any foolishness to shock her.... I'm really most interested in living. Tell her so. She will believe it. For I have never lied to her, Cleland."

They walked together to the area gate.

"Stephanie should see her attorneys," said Grismer. "The easiest way, I think, would be for her to leave the state and for me to go abroad. Her attorneys will advise her. But," he added carelessly, "there's time to talk over that with her. The main thing is to know that she will be free. And she will be.... Good night, Cleland!" ... He laughed boyishly. "I've never been as happy in my whole life!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

With the clang of the closing gate, Grismer's handsome face altered terribly, and he turned deathly white for a moment. Two policemen lounged by in the glare of the arc-light; one of them glanced down into the areaway and saw a pallid face behind the iron bars—turned sharply to look again.

"Gee," he said to his mate, "d'yeh get that guy's map?"

"Coke," said the other carelessly. "Looks like a feller I seen in Sing Sing waitin' for the priest—what's his name, now——" The voices receded. But Grismer had heard.

Perhaps his brain registered the scene sketched by the policeman—a bloodless face behind the death-cell grating—the distant steps of the procession already sounding in the corridor.

He opened the gate and went out to the sidewalk where a young girl, unskillfully painted, stood looking about her preliminary to opening the night's campaign.

"Hello," she said tentatively.

"Ah," he said pleasantly, "a goddess of the stars!"

"Got anything on?" she asked, approaching with her mirthless smile.

"Yes, a few casual garments."

She looked him over with the uncanny wisdom of her caste, and, young as she was, she divined in this man only the opportunity to waste her time.

"What's the matter?" she asked, glancing at his shabby dressing gown. "Up against it?"

"What I'm up against," he said, absently, "will look good to you, too, some day."

"What's that?"

"Death, my dear."

"Quit kiddin'!" she retorted, with an uneasy laugh. "You got your looks yet." She stepped nearer, looking at him curiously. "Nothing like that," she said. "You're a looker. Buck up, old scout!"

She was leaning against the railing where he stood resting his back. Presently he turned, leisurely, and surveyed her.

"You *are* young," he said. "You'll be a tired girl before you're up against what I am."

"What have you done?" she enquired curiously.

"Nothing."

"Sure. That's why we all go up the river."

"I'm going across the river," he remarked, smiling.

"Which?"

"The Styx. You never heard of it, I suppose."

"One of them dirty rivers in Jersey?"

He nodded gravely.

"What's out there?" she enquired.

"I don't know, my dear."

"Then what's the idea?"

She waited for an answer, but his golden eyes were dreamily remote.

The girl lingered. Once or twice professional sense suggested departure, but when her tired eyes of a child rested on him something held her inert.

When she again interrupted his reverie he looked around at her as though he had never before seen her, and she repeated what she had said.

"What?" he asked sharply.

"I got a fiver that ain't workin'," she said again. "You can use it in your business if it's any good."

"My dear child," he said pleasantly, "you're very kind, but that's not what the matter is." He turned, dropped his arm on the railing, facing her: "What's your name?"

"Gloria Cameron."

"Come on," he said, good-humouredly, "what's your other name?"

"Anne."

"Anne, what?"

"O'Hara."

"Will you wait a minute?"

She nodded uncertainly.

He went back through the area, entered his studio and dressed in his shabby street clothes.

The cheque was still lying on a small table where Cleland had placed it at his request. And now he picked it up, dipped a rusty pen into an ink-bottle, and indorsed the cheque, making it payable to Anne O'Hara. Then he took his straw hat and went out.

The girl was waiting.

"Anne," he said, "I want you to read what's written on this pretty perforated piece of paper." He held it so that the electric light fell on it.

"Is it good?" she asked in an awed voice.

"Perfectly." He turned the cheque over and showed her the indorsement.

She found her voice presently:

"What are you putting over on me?"

He said:

"I'd give this cheque to you now, but it wouldn't be any good when the banks open to-morrow."

She stared her question, and he laughed:

"It's a law concerning cheques. Never mind. But there's a way to beat it. I had a lot of money once. They'll take my paper at Square Jack Hennesey's. Shall we stroll up that way?"

She did not understand. It was quite evident that she had no faith in the scrap of paper either. But it was still more evident that she was willing to remain with him, even at the loss of professional opportunities—even though she was facing the obloquy of being "kidded."

"Come into my studio first," he said.

She went without protest. In the brightly lighted basement he turned and scrutinized her coolly from head to foot.

"How old?" he asked bluntly.

"Seventeen."

"How long are you on the job?"

"Two years."

"Whose are you?"

"I'm for myself——"

"Come on! Don't lie!"

She straightened her thin finger in defiance:

"What are you? A bull?"

"You know I'm not. Who are you working for? Wait! Never mind! You're working for somebody, aren't you?"

"Y-yes."

"Do your folks know it?"

"No."

"What was it—cloaks, feathers, department store?"

She nodded.

"You *can* go back?"

She remained silent, and he repeated the question. Then the girl turned white under her paint.

"Damn you!" she said, "what are you trying to do to me?"

"Send you home, Anne, with a couple of thousand real money. Will you go?"

"Show it to me!" she said, but her voice had become childish and tremulous and her painted mouth was quivering.

"I'm going to show it to you," he said pleasantly. "I'll get it at Square Jack's for you. If I do will you fly the coop? I mean now, to-night! Will you?"

"W-with you?"

"Dear child, I've got to cross that dirty Jersey river. I told you. You live up state, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Hudson."

"All right. Will you go now, just as you are? You'd stand a fat chance if you went back and tried to pack up. That thing would batter you to a pulp, wouldn't he?"

She nodded.

"All right," he said. "Take off your hat and wash your face, Anne. They'd be on to you at home. I've got to pack a few things for my journey and write a couple of letters. Get all the paint off while I'm busy. There's soap, towels, and a basin behind that screen."

She came slowly to him and stood looking at him out of her disenchanted young eyes.

"Is this on the square?" she asked.

"Won't you take a chance that it is?" he asked, taking her slim hands and looking her in the eyes.

"Yes.... I'll take a chance with you—if you ask me to."

"I do." He patted her hands and smiled, then released them. "Hustle!" he said. "I'll be ready very soon."

He wrote first to Cleland:

DEAR CLELAND:

I think I'll go up tonight, stay at Pittsfield, and either drive across the mountain in the morning or take an early train through the tunnel for North Adams. Either way ought to land me at Runner's Rest station about eight in the morning.

I can't tell you what your kindness has done for me. I think it was about all I really wanted in the world—your friendship. It seems to clean off my slate, square me with life.

I shall start in a few minutes. Until we meet, then, your friend, OSWALD GRISMER.

He directed the envelope to Cleland's studio in town.

The other letter he directed to Stephanie at Runner's Rest and stamped it.

He wrote to her:

I'm happier than I have been in years because I can do this thing for you.

And now I'm going to admit something which will ease your mind immensely: the situation was so impossible that I also began to weary of it a little. You are entitled to the truth.

And now life looks very inviting to me. Liberty is the most wonderful thing in the world. And I am restless for it, restless to begin again.

So if I come to you as a comrade, don't think for a moment that any sympathy is due me. Alas, man belongs to a restless sex, Stephanie, and the four winds are less irresponsible and inconstant!

As a comrade, I should delight in you. You are a very wonderful girl—but you belong to Cleland and not to me. Don't worry. I'm absolutely satisfied. Until we meet, then,

Your grateful friend,

OSWALD.

"I'll get a special for this letter on our way uptown," he said, voicing his thoughts aloud to the girl who was scrubbing her painted lips and cheeks behind the screen.

When she emerged, pinning on her hat, he had packed a suitcase and was ready.

They found a taxi in Washington Square.

On the way uptown he mailed his letter to Stephanie; sent a district messenger with his letter to Cleland's studio; sent a night letter to Runner's Rest saying that he would take accommodations on a train which would be due at Runner's Rest station at eight next morning; stopped at the darkened and barred house of Square Jack Hennesey, and was admitted after being scrutinized through a sliding grill.

When he came out half an hour later he told the driver to go to the Grand Central Station, and got into the cab...

"Anne," he said gaily, "here's the two thousand. Count it."

The sheafs of new bills pinned to their paper bands lay in her lap for a long time before she touched them. Even then she merely lifted one packet and let it drop without even looking at it. So Grismer folded the bills and put them into her reticule. Then he took her slim left hand in both of his and held it while they rode on in silence through the electric glare of the metropolis.

At the station he dismissed the taxicab, bought a ticket and sleeping-car accommodations to Hudson—managed to get a state-room for her all to herself.

"You won't sleep much," he remarked, smiling, "so we'll have to provide you with amusement, Anne."

Carrying his suitcase, the girl walking beside him, he walked across the great rotunda to the newsstand. There, and at the confectionery counter opposite, he purchased food for mind and body—light food suitable for a young and badly bruised mind, and for a soul in embryo, still in the making.

Then he went over to another window and bought a ticket for himself to Pittsfield, and sleeping accommodations.

"We travel by different lines, Anne," he said, opening his portfolio and placing his own tickets in it, where several letters lay addressed to him at his basement studio. Then he replaced the portfolio in his breast pocket.

"I'll go with you to your train," he said, declining with a shake of his head the offices of a red-capped porter. "Your train leaves at 12.10 and we have only a few minutes."

They walked together through the gates, the officials permitting him to accompany her.

The train stood on the right—a very long train, and they had a long distance to walk along the concrete platform before they found her car.

A porter showed them to her stateroom. Grismer tipped him generously:

"Be very attentive to this young lady," he said, "and see that she has every service required, and that she is notified in plenty of time to get off at Hudson. Now you may leave us until we ring."

He turned from the corridor and entered the stateroom, closing the door behind him. The girl sat on the sofa, very pale, with a dazed expression in her eyes.

He seated himself beside her and drew her hands into his own.

"Let me tell you something," he said cheerfully. "Everybody makes mistakes. You've made some; so have I; so has everybody I ever heard of.

"Everybody gets in wrong at one time or another. The idea is to get out again and make a fresh start.... Will you try?"

She nodded, so close to tears that she could not speak.

"Promise me you'll make a hard fight to travel straight?"

"Y-yes."

"It won't be easy. But try to win out, Anne. Back there—in those streets and alleys—there's nothing to hope for except death. You'll find it if you ever go back—in some hospital, in some saloon-brawl, in some rooming-house—it will surely, surely find you by bullet, by knife, by disease—sooner or later it will find you unless you start to search for it yourself."

He patted her hand, patted her pale cheek:

"It's a losing game, Anne. There's nothing in it. I guess you know that already. So go back to your people and tell them the last lies you ever tell. And stick. Stay put, little girl. You really *are* all right, you know, but you got in wrong. Now, you're out!"

He laughed and stood up. She lifted her head. All her colour had fled.

"Don't forget me," she whispered.

"Not as long as I live, Anne."

"May I—I write to you?"

He thought a minute, then with a smile:

"Why not?" He found a card and pencil, wrote his name and address, and laid it on the sofa. "If it would do any good to think of me when you're likely to get in wrong," he said, "then try to remember that I was square with you. And be so to me. Will you?"

"I—will."

That was all. She was crying and her eyes were too blind with tears to see the expression of his face as he kissed her.

He went away lightly, swinging his suitcase, and stood on the very end of the cement platform looking out across a wilderness of tracks branching out into darkness, set with red, green, and blue lamps.

He waited, lighting a cigarette. On his left a heavy electric engine rolled into the station, drawing a Western express train. The lighted windows of the cars threw a running yellow illumination over his motionless figure for a few moments, then the train passed into the depths of the station.

And now her train began to move very slowly out through the wilderness of yard tracks. Car after car passed him, gaining momentum all the while.

When the last car sped by and the tail-lights dwindled into perspective, Grismer had finished his cigarette.

Behind him lay the dusky, lamp-lit tunnel of the station. Before him, through ruddy darkness, countless jewelled lamps twinkled, countless receding rails glimmered, leading away into the night.

It was in him to travel that way—the way of the glimmering, jewelled lamps, the road of the shining rails.

But first he shoved his suitcase, with his foot, over the platform's edge, as though it had fallen there by accident.... And, as though he had followed to recover it, he climbed down among the tracks.

There was a third rail running parallel to the twin rails. It was roofed with wood. Lying flat, there in the shimmering dusk, he could look up under the wooden guard rail and see it.

Then, resting both legs across the steel car-tracks, he reached out and took the guarded third rail in both hands.

CHAPTER XXXV

The train that Cleland took, after calling Runner's Rest on the telephone, landed him at the home station at an impossible hour. Stars filled the heavens with a magnificent lustre; the July darkness was superb and still untouched by the coming dawn.

As he stepped from the car the tumbling roar of the river filled his ears—that and the high pines' sighing under the stars, and the sweet-scented night wind in his face greeted and met him as he set foot on the platform at Runner's Rest station and looked around for the conveyance that he had asked Stephanie to send.

There was nobody in sight except the baggage agent. He walked toward the rear of the station, turned the corner, and saw Stephanie standing there bareheaded in the starlight, wrapped in a red cloak, her hair in two heavy braids.

"Steve!" he exclaimed. "Why on earth did you come—you darling!"

"Did you imagine I wouldn't?" she asked unsteadily.

"I told you over the wire to send Williams with a buckboard."

"Everybody was in bed when the telephone rang. So I concluded to sit up for you, and when the time came I went out to the stable, harnessed up, and drove over here."

Her hand was trembling in his while she spoke, but her voice was under control.

They turned together and went over to the buckboard. She stepped in; he strapped his suitcase on behind, then followed her and took the reins from her gloved hands.

They were very quiet, but he could feel her tremble a little at times, when their shoulders were in contact. The tension betrayed itself in his voice at moments, too.

"I have a night letter from Oswald," she said. "They telephoned it up from the station. He is coming to-morrow morning."

"That's fine. He's a splendid fellow, Steve."

"I have always known it."

"I know you have. I'm terribly sorry that I did not know him better."

The buckboard turned from the station road into a fragrant wood-road. In the scented dusk little night-moths with glistening wings drifted through the rays of the wagon-lamp like snowflakes. A bird, aroused from slumber in the thicket, sang a few sweet, sleepy notes.

"Tell me," said Stephanie, in a low, tremulous voice.

He understood:

"It was entirely Oswald's doing. I never dreamed of mentioning it to him. I was absolutely square to him and to you, Steve. I went there with no idea that he knew I was in love with you—or that you cared for me.... He met me with simple cordiality. We looked at his beautiful model for the fountain. I don't think I betrayed in voice or look or manner that anything was wrong with me.... Then, with a very winning simplicity, he spoke of you, of himself.... There seemed to be nothing for me to say; he knew that I was in love with you, and that you had come to care for me.... And I heard a man speak to another man as only a gentleman could speak—a real man, rare

and thoroughbred.... It cost him something to say to me what he said. His nerve was heart-breaking to me when he found the courage to tell me what his father had done.

"He told me with a smile that his pride was dead—that he had cut its throat. But it was still alive, Steve—a living, quivering thing. And I saw him slay it before my eyes—kill it there between his, with his steady, pleasant smile.... Well, he meant me to understand him and what he had done.... And I understand.... And I understand your loyalty, now. And the dreadful fear which kept you silent.... But there is no need to be afraid any more."

"Did he say so?"

"Yes. He told me to tell you. He said you'd believe him because he had never lied to you."

"I do believe him," she said. "I have never known him to lie to anybody."

The light over the porch at Runner's Rest glimmered through the trees. In a few moments they were at the door.

"I'll stable the horse," he said briefly.

She was in the library when he returned from the barn.

"The dawn is just breaking," she said. "It is wonderful out of doors. Do you hear the birds?"

"Do you want to go to bed, Steve?"

"No. Do you?"

"Wait for me, then."

She waited while he went to his room. The windows were open and the fresh, clean air of dawn carried the perfume of wet roses into the house.

The wooded eastern hills were very dark against the dawn; silvery mist marked the river's rushing course; thickets rang with bird songs.

She walked to the porch. Under its silver-sheeted dew the lawn looked like a lake.

Very far away across the valley a train was rushing northward. She could hear the faint vibration, the distant whistle. Then, from close by, the clear, sweet call of a meadow-lark mocked the unseen locomotive's warning in exquisite parody.

Cleland came down presently, freshened, dressed in flannels.

"Steve," he said, "you've only a nightgown on under that cloak!"

"It's all right. I'm going to get soaked anyway, if we walk on the lawn."

She laughed, drew off her slippers, flung them into the room behind her, then, with her lovely little naked feet she stepped ankle deep into the drenched grass, turned, tossed one corner of her red cloak over her shoulder, and looked back at him.

Over the soaking lawn they wandered, his arm encircling her slender body, her hand covering his, holding it closer at her waist.

The sky over the eastern hills was tinted with palest saffron now; birds sang everywhere. Down by the river cat-birds alternately mewed like sick kittens or warbled like thrushes; rose grosbeaks filled the dawn with heavenly arias, golden orioles fluted from every elm, song-sparrows twittered and piped their cheery amateur

efforts, and there came the creak and chirr of purple grackles from the balsams and an incessant, never-ending rush of jolly melody from the robins.

Over the tumbling river, through the hanging curtains of mist, a great blue heron, looming enormously in the vague light, flapped by in stately flight and alighted upon a bar of golden sand.

More swiftly now came the transfiguration of the world, shell-pink and gold stained the sky; then a blaze of dazzling light cut the wooded crests opposite as the thin knife-rim of the sun glittered above the trees.

All the world rang out with song now; the river mists lifted and curled and floated upward in silvery shreds disclosing golden shoals and pebbled rapids all criss-crossed with the rosy lattice of the sun.

The girl at his side leaned her cheek against his shoulder.

"What would all this have meant without you?" she sighed. "The world turned very dark for me yesterday. And it was the blackest night I ever knew."

"And for me," he said; "—I had no further interest in living."

"Nor I.... I wanted to die last night.... I prayed I might.... I nearly did die—with happiness—when I heard your voice over the wire. That was all that mattered in the world—your voice calling me—out of the depths—dearest—dearest——"

With her waist closely enlaced, he turned and looked deep into her grey eyes—clear, sweet eyes tinged with the lilac-grey of iris bloom.

"The world is just beginning for us," he said. "This is the dawn of our first morning on earth."

The slender girl in his arms lifted her face toward his. Both her hands crept up around his neck. The air around them rang with the storm of bird music bursting from every thicket, confusing, almost stunning their ears with its heavenly tumult.

But within the house there was another clamour which they did not hear—the reiterated ringing of the telephone. They did not hear it, standing there in the golden glory of the sunrise, with the young world awaking all around them and the birds' ecstasy overwhelming every sound save the reckless laughter of the river.

But, in the dim house, Helen awoke in her bed, listening. And after she had listened a while she sprang up, slipped out into the dark hall, and unhooked the receiver from the hinge.

And after she had heard what the distant voice had to say she wrote it down on the pad of paper hanging by the receiver—wrote it, shivering there in the darkened hall:

Oswald Grismer, on his way last night to visit you at Runner's Rest, was killed by the third rail in the Grand Central Station. He was identified by letters. Harry Belter was notified, and has taken charge of the body. There is no doubt that it was entirely accidental. Mr. Grismer's suit-case evidently fell to the track, and, attempting to recover it, he came into contact with the charged rail and was killed instantly.

MARIE CLIFF BELTER.

When she had written it down, she went to Stephanie's room and found it empty.

But through the open window sunshine streamed, and presently she saw the red-cloaked figure down by the river's edge; heard the girl's sweet laughter float out among the willows—enchanted, gay, care-free laughter, where she had waded out into the shallow rapids and now stood knee-deep, challenging her lover to follow her if he dared.

Then Helen saw his white-flannelled figure wading boldly out through the water in pursuit; saw the slim, red-cloaked girl turn to flee; went closer to the window and stood with the written message in her hand, watching the distant scene through eyes dimmed with those illogical tears which women shed when there is nothing else in the world to do.

It was plain that they thought themselves all alone in the world, with the sunrise and the blue mountains as an agreeable setting, created as a background for them alone.

Twice the girl narrowly escaped capture; above the rush of the river their gales of laughter came back on the summer wind. Suddenly she slipped, fell with a cry into a deeper pool, and was caught up by him and carried shoreward, with her white arms around his neck and her lips resting on his.

And as the tall young lover, dripping from head to foot, came striding across the lawn with all he loved on earth laughing up at him in his arms, the girl at the window turned away and went into her own room with the written message in her hand.

And there, seated on the edge of her bed, she read it over and over, crying, uncertain, wondering whether she might not withhold it for a few hours more.

Because life is very wonderful, and youth more wonderful still. And there is always time to talk of life and death when daylight dies and the last laugh is spent—when shadows fall, and blossoms close, and birds grow silent among the branches.

She did not know why she was crying. She had not cared for the dead man.

She looked out through drawn blinds at the sunshine, not knowing why she wept, not knowing what to do.

Then, from the hall came Stephanie's ecstatic voice:

"Helen! Wake up, darling, and come down! Because Jim and I have the most wonderful thing in the world to tell you!"

But on the paper in her lap was written something more wonderful still. For there is nothing more wonderful than that beginning of everything which is called the end.