A LEAF FROM LIFE BOOK
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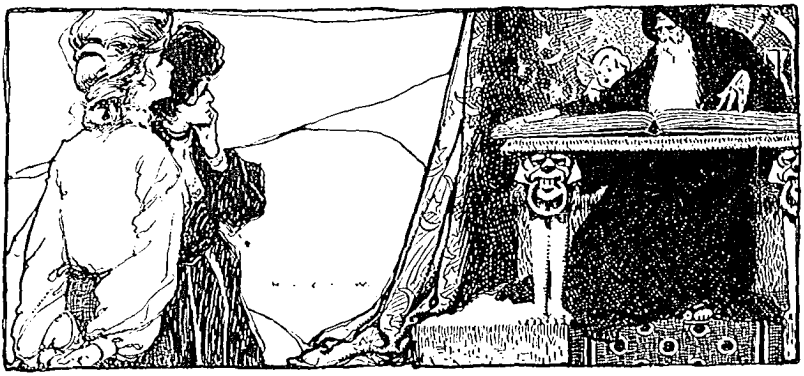

A LEAF FROM LIFE'S BOOK

BY VIRGINIA WOODWARD CLOUD

"I WILL not look!" I cried, with fierceness. "I will not!"

The gray rain dashed and rattled on the low roof, stinging the attic-windows with its keen missiles.

"I will not look!"

I flung my hands over my eyes, and her laugh throbbed in my ears. She stood against the worm-eaten rafters and blackened, dusty darkness with its bags of herbs thrust downward, like skeleton hands out of void, and chains of dried fruit, seeming in their familiarity to belong to some dim, trite past—a world of uneventful routine, where I had my being before the waters of that present rolled over me.

Then, all that lay hidden, all the pent flame of the universe, seemed to spring into life and lap her round as she threw her small head back and laughed defiantly, alluringly, daringly, and danced before me—a flower of the tropics breaking into bloom from the quiet, dun-colored soil of calm.

"You shall look!" She sent the words softly across the dusty space between us. "Me—I have made many look! See, here is something you cannot do, Mademoiselle Perfection! You say that I cannot wield the broom or practise the tedious art of cookery—as you English know it. Peste!"—she threw her arms out, and glanced at her brown fingertips—"nor your plump-plump of the churn. Ugh! Behold! . . . Think you I have made bread and swept for six months in Paris?"

I stared in spite of myself. The dark-blue cotton skirt fell to the floor and she stood in scarlet from head to feet—vivid, pulsating red. Quick! A comb flew from her hair and it lay a cloud about her shoulders. Again! A little red cap with old lace was on her saucy head. Lo, what a foot! A scarlet slipper was upon it. Then, holding the rim of those waves of scarlet which swept her round—she danced.

I, who had never seen the like, caught my breath, forgot the quick tide of resentment which forced me through its mad and primal nature to rebel, and sat crouching against the old hair trunk, fascinated and forgetful even that such a thing was deemed a sin by Aunt Hannah, oblivious to all except that wonderful figure growing out of the shadow—the scarlet flower rising to the light, gathering life, quivering with vitality.

She danced.

Softly, in measure to the rhythmic rain. Gently as it grew gentle. Tenderly as it grew tender, closing maternally and crooning above us. Fiercely as it stung with passionate vehemence around us.

Then—a swaying creature of scarlet,

Drawn by H. C. Wall

"Holding the rim of those waves of scarlet which swept her round—she danced"

a quivering butterfly, poised with red wings, a path of flame behind it in the sunlight.

Then—a poppy waving in a field of wheat, the shadows of coming storm passing swiftly overhead.

A whirl—a sound——

She clapped her hands and broke into low laughter like the breaking of a stream out of the shadow of its copse, and swept a courtesy, cap in hand, hair flying backward, and daring mockery in her eyes uplifted to the trap-door, where a figure stood applauding. Then, with an instant's cessation of heart-beat, I knew that he had seen it all.

I was scarcely conscious of the rapid transition to the practical, as she commanded him to cover his eyes, and presto! the blue skirt was on, the cap hidden, the red waves lying like a pool of blood between us. Her little brown jacket was slipped on, and her hair twisted rebelliously into its pins. She stood, smiling demurely sidewise as he came forward, where I crouched beside the trunk, in that darker shadow of remoteness.

Surely his eyes brightened as they discovered me.

"The rain made outdoor work impossible. It is a furious storm, and I came across in the boat to be entertained, when, behold what I happened upon!"

She laughed the soft response that answers for words, and waved him aside imperiously, while gathering the red billows of silk in her arms, and motioned to the hair trunk.

"Open it for me!"

When had *I* ordered him? I stood looking on, unable to speak, to enter into badinage, and he opened and raised the lid and flung the garments in. It was not her way to be orderly, and years of Aunt Hannah's tuition had not made her so. She dropped the lid with a gesture of her slim brown hand as expressive as was every movement, and ran to the trap-door, beckoning him imperiously.

"Come! The dark rain makes me nervous. I would be amused. I cannot remain in the quiet. It is of a dulness unspeakable! Attendez, monsieur! Vite!"

She laughed back at him, her eyes on a level with the floor, as she descended; but he looked at me, surely with entreaty.

"Will you come, Bethesda?"

"No."

My eyes did not meet his long enough to learn if perplexity, pain or relief responded. The worm of suspicion was gnawing at my heart, and I turned away, adding:

"I am busy."

"You are always busy," he said, but not complainingly. "Come down and rest."

She stood silently while he spoke, her lashes sweeping her cheeks, her head drooping. Why could she not hold it up? It always bent on its stem, flower-like. Why did little tendrils of hair always caress her neck, like those of Psyche?

The trap fell upon them, leaving darkness where a square of light had been. Then I smote my hands together and dropped to my knees, my arms flung out on the old trunk, my face pressed upon them. Wild sobs shook me and rent my heart, yet easing it momentarily of the horrible new pain which had smitten it without forewarning, like light upon a sword.

The sight of the short red skirt and the little cap had brought it all back—the quick rebellion of my childhood when, on a stormy night, my father, who had been a doctor, brought home with him from town this strange, foreign-eyed child, whose mother had died suddenly after the night's performance of a traveling company.

My father's was an overtender nature of a man, and the poor creature's fright and distress had wrung from him a promise to place the child in a home. His own was the only practicable one at the time. She was a sullen little thing at first, with flashes of rage and suspicion in the depths of her unintelligible eyes. She clung to a bundle, from which she refused to part. It contained garments that appeared most remarkable to my untutored sight—dressed as I habitually was in the plainest of home-made clothes. These were the scarlet skirt of a dancer, laver

upon layer of filmy stuff, and a little red cap.

Aunt Hannah had confiscated them at once, calling them "heathen rags," but the child had seized upon them, screaming, and dragging them away, until my father entered, to discover Aunt Hannah staring in stern amazement at a fiery-eyed tornado, its arms full of scarlet waves, and angry tears coursing down its face.

I was looking on in fright, drawn back against a wall, my little hands rolled in my Holland apron.

My father settled the problem by taking Celeste in his arms and talking gently to her in French, of which I then knew nothing, and in which she sobbingly responded, pointing meanwhile to Aunt Hannah as to a modern figure of the Medusa.

She was allowed to keep the dress and cap, as a means of pacification not indorsed by Aunt Hannah's methods. They had belonged to her mother, and I heard Aunt Hannah tell a neighbor that Celeste's mother was a dancer. Celeste herself, young as she was, had evidently received some training in this line, and could pirouette in a manner marvelous to sight and impossible to my untrained little toes. Nor could I understand her jargon, but set to work patiently to teach her mine, which she caught with wonderful rapidity. She amused my father. Her odd, piquant ways and birdlike movements, her tricks of gesture and expression, entertained him after the monotonous routine of his day. She was like a ray of sun in a dull place. But it took me longer to grow accustomed to her, for we were diametrically opposed by nature. With the silent repression of a solitary child, I figured it out, when alone in the attic beside the little chest which held my treasures.

We were the same age, but she was much smaller, and years older in experience. The things that I loved amused her, and she rather scorned that which gave me pleasure. She did not like the barn, nor the dim coolness of the milkhouse behind the hill, with its earthen floor and pebbled stream running through, its shining pans and crocks in the clear, trickling water. She cared nothing for the hills at evening, nor for the orchard—except in peach season. She could not endure the care of flowers, but would exclaim rapturously over their beauty, only to fling them aside. Try as I might, I could not love her—she was a mystery to me.

My father, with the easy indulgence of a sweet nature, preferred to keep his promise to the letter, rather than go to the trouble of accustoming Celeste to a new home. But she grew dissatisfied in time, and before she had finished at the county school near us, she made an application for a position to teach French in the city, and obtained it. From there she went to Paris for a year. It was none too soon, for she could not fail to see how tenaciously Aunt Hannah held to my own small dignity as daughter of the house, and that she had never ceased to deplore that domestic work was beyond the range of Celeste's vision. The girl slipped out of responsibility as a bird flits to a higher bough and sings over earth's seed-time and harvest.

In my recollection, only one thing had awakened more than a temperamental enthusiasm in Celeste—the sight of my grandmother's jewel-case, which one winter night Aunt Hannah permitted us to examine. The old-fashioned topazes, rubies and emeralds were far too garish for any wearing of mine, but mine they were. Celeste's breath came in long-drawn exclamations of French ecstasy, and she seized upon them and put them on—a necklace around her brow, Egyptianlike, bracelets on her arms, a chain about her throat and earrings hung over her small ears; then she sprang away from Aunt Hannah's detaining hand, crying:

"Behold! Je suis belle! Je suis belle!"

Thereafter, I unconsciously associated her with jewels, knowing that the day would come when she should wear those of her own, because she always succeeded in having what she wanted.

As this thought struck through me on that dark afternoon in the attic, I sat up suddenly with a throb of rebellion which frightened me. She always got

what she wanted! What was it, then, that she wanted now? Was it my lover?

The rain stilled overhead and plashed in trickles on the windows, as I strained my sight through its grayness, determined to see things as they were.

The McCrae place was on the other side of the river whose cove penetrated our land. Pen McCrae had been away at college for years, and I knew but little about him until he returned to practise medicine in the town where my father's office had been. It was only during the spring and summer of this year that we had been thrown closely together, with the result of inevitable congeniality which promised much more.

The coming of love is never to be defined, its signals being the sweeter ones of uncertainty, and perhaps just at the time of this storm-beaten afternoon, love realized that it would never be dearer than now, when "in search of a word."

I knew no reason for doubt or unhappiness, and had taken especial delight in making the place ready for Celeste's home-coming, as she was to spend the last of her vacation with us. When she did arrive, the slight, brown-clad figure, with its birdlike glances, was familiar, but town life had accentuated her individual style. There was an added certainty of herself, a consciousness of power, which set me apart, and kept me silently ill at ease. When she talked to Pen on the porch, the evening she arrived, I felt like an alien. By and by she sat on the steps, with the red cord of her guitar hung around her neck, and sung a Spanish air with a tender cadence. She had tucked a rose behind her ear, and standing in the door, I marked Pen as he stooped for it when it fell, and remained on one knee, looking up, as she smiled downward.

A feeling of helplessness came over me, and I did not pause to reason that had he been another her mode of singing would have been the same; that she was probably accustomed to attracting every man who came in her way. I turned away and left them.

It seemed hours afterward when I heard Pen's voice saying good night, and went to the door. He sprang up the stairs to meet me, the well-known light of eagerness in his eyes, but when he was gone I closed the house and went to bed with a sudden tempest of unaccustomed feeling in my heart, which frightened me, and I realized for the first time what he had become to me and that I was jealous.

Was this the branding-iron of jealousy of which I had read—this anger and bitterness—this weight like physical agony? I crept into bed bewildered, blinded to all except pain.

Presently, the door opened softly and a ray of candle-light struck across the ceiling, and Aunt Hannah peered in, saying:

"Are you in bed, child?"

"Yes," I said, not wondering at this, although she never moved out of the orbit of habit. She came slowly across to my window and arranged the curtain in her methodical way.

"There will be a storm," she said. "We must prepare for all things—for all things," she added. "Life trains women secretly for the moment when it takes them unawares."

My mind was too stunned, in its mechanical moving amid the mazes of its new discovery, to realize that Aunt Hannah had not come to my room only to warn me of a storm.

It came that night, however, wiping out all lingering trace of summer with a sweep of cold fury. The next day was dark and turbulent, and I went busily from one duty to another, with an intense desire to be occupied, and to avoid talking alone with Celeste. It was in the afternoon, when she threw herself on the settle with a book, that I crept up to the attic, but presently she followed me.

I pretended to be absorbed in the contents of my little chest, but she flew to the old hair trunk and drew out one thing after another, talking in her desultory fashion.

"O-h! How can you endure it here? This quiet! No one near except your young doctor—although he is very nice, the young doctor!"

I was stung into retort.

"There is no reason to attribute Doctor

McCrae to me in that possessive manner!" I said.

She laughed softly. "Reason!—reason! That is so like you, Bethesda. He is an excellent young man, but quiet. Handsome, I admit, but——" She threw her hands out deprecatingly. "This intense quiet! Me, I do not like it."

"It is strange, then, that you return to it."

The words were not out before I sat shamed. Was she not in a sense a guest? Her gray eyes narrowed to black lines, as she glanced at me curiously.

"Ah—I like you better so. It has always ennuied me that you could not quarrel! Words—they are woman's stiletto. 'Tis well, for when they do not speak, the knife turns inward. You are grown handsome, Bethesda—ma foi, yes! Superbly handsome! But large"—she shrugged her shoulders slightly, and smiled contentedly. "Me?—there is never quite enough of me. You and your blondness and your dark young doctor make a fine pair—tres belle!"

I started to speak, but she hummed an aria and I stifled the words on my lips, and took a book from the pile of my father's old books which lay beside me, and curled on the floor in the window, where the world beyond was only a driving cloud of gray rain. These were the words my eyes fell upon, to be developed afterward under the ray of memory:

"For, there is love of woman and there is love of man, and whereas the love of woman is ever a certain thing, the love of man must ever be an uncertain thing. For the love of woman lives nourished on itself, but no sooner doth a man know himself bound than he would be free."

I read this over and my face burned. Was it true? Did he dread to know himself bound? Celeste had often complained of my calmness and constraint. Now, beneath its mask, warred a tumult which swayed me like a fierce undercurrent under still waves. So unforeseen was it that I felt a stranger to myself, and suddenly I knew that I was afraid.

Her low laughter rippled around me, cooingly, through the words:

"Look, Damoiselle Puritan! I cannot dance without the audience—look at me!"

Then the tide within me broke its bounds in one impassioned utterance that seemed to come from another, as I flung my hands over my eyes:

"Go away from me! I will not look! I will not look!"

Then she danced.

Later, when the fury of sobs had spent itself, I raised my head, listening. An hour must have passed. The murmur of her voice was audible below, and now and then that of Pen McCrae in accompaniment to her laughter.

The light was ghostly in the attic, and I sprang up with a wave of shame scorching me. To what had I condescended? To tears, jealousy, and for a man who had not asked me to be his wife! I saw it all clearly. I was ignorant of the ways of the world, and Celeste's inheritance seemed to be the knowledge of it.

But, "whereas the love of woman is ever a certain thing, the love of man must ever be an uncertain thing."

I threw the low window open and leaned out, letting the wind and rain rush against my burning face. The river roared at the foot of the garden-path, a seething cloud of sullen gray, angry at being overcome by the giant wind. Presently, I heard my name called, and rubbed my face before looking down. Pen McCrae stood below, and he looked anxious. He was covered by a boatman's oilskin coat, and as he raised his cap the rain plashed upon his head.

"Bethesda," he called, "I am going across now. The river is rising rapidly, and I must see to the stock, but I shall return later."

"No, do not. We shall do very well," I said, brightly.

"You may need a man here. It's the worst storm we've had in years."

I caught the words through the noise of the river, and called back:

"Oh, no, we are accustomed to the river. Do not think of coming back."

Celeste's dark head showed out of the window below me. I strained to hear her words:

"Yes, come! It frightens me—this

roaring! I want you to come back. You will?"

He nodded, but continued to look upward.

"Shall I, Bethesda?"

"Not on a night such as this will be," I answered.

"Yes, yes, come!" called Celeste. He ran toward the landing, and I crossed the floor singing, conscious that my footsteps would be heard below; then returned softly to try and discern his boat pushing off and the solitary figure working vigorously into the gray obscurity beyond.

When I went down to supper, Celeste glanced up. My face was flushed, my hair twisted high, and a blue ribbon at my throat. What woman has a full white throat and does not know it? She uttered an exclamation in French and inspected me, her elbows upon the table—a position prohibited by Aunt Hannah years before.

"You should never ignore dress, Bethesda—the large blonde cannot afford to."

"Can any one?" I asked, lightly.

She threw her hands out deprecatingly.

"Cela depend! Are there to be guests to-night?"

"In this storm? Hardly," I said.

"Pen McCrae said that he would come," she added.

Aunt Hannah's shrewd old eyes looked at us across the teapot.

"He better not attempt it. I never heard the river roar this way but once before—the night when my brother brought you home, a little child, Celeste. He was a kind man."

Celeste disliked to be reminded of the disagreeable.

"It was horrible, Tante Hannah! The noise of it frightens me yet. I came in a storm—well, I may go in a storm!"

That evening she crouched before the blazing logs, saying little, through the hours which seemed to me endless. I felt feverishly bright, and opened the piano and played mechanically, softly—even the action of the fingers was better than none. We said nothing about going to bed until a late hour. More than once, Aunt Hannah paused in counting her stitches and harkened the river's roaring, as it grew more ominous. As blood responds, sometimes I divined that she understood me, through the medium of long-tried loyalty which expresses itself without words.

Old Dilsy nodded before the kitchen fire, and when we started up-stairs at midnight, she rolled herself in a blanket and lay on Aunt Hannah's floor. It was not Aunt Hannah's way to yield to apprehension unless justifiable, and she said little of the storm when we separated. I did not undress, however, but felt cold and threw round me a great cloak and put a stick on the fire, keenly alive to the rush of sound without, and listening to hear above the storm a shout from below, or the stamping of feet at the door.

I stood before the glass lighting my candles, when the door opened and Celeste entered, and stood stripped of bravado, her hands clutching her warm Japanese robe.

"I cannot imagine how you endure it!" she burst out, shivering. "Have you no feeling? Mon dieu! This awful roaring? This dashing of water! The creak, creak of the house. 'Tis frightful! I did not recall how frightful until I returned to it!"

I suggested that she should lie on my bed under a blanket and grow warm, but she stood before the fire, her gaze upon me. My forces had rallied, however, and the image in the glass was reassuring. The face was serene and fair, the blue eyes bright and the white throat a fitting support for its mass of fair hair. I heard her mutter under her breath, and I smiled over my shoulder; then the smile was held on my lips at the expression of her own. All the childlike beauty had died, and in its place burned a fierce, dark light; her brows grew into a hard line. Suddenly, she sprang forward and seized my arm.

"Tell me, are you engaged to him?"

"To him?" I repeated, my gaze meeting hers directly. "As there is but one man near, I suppose you mean Doctor McCrae. Certainly not! Why should I be?"

She laughed suddenly, a hysterical note.

"Why?—why? Because, mademoiselle, I could swear that you love him! And that he—well, men are different!"

I held her by the arm, and we stood on equal ground, but I looked down.

"How dare you!" I breathed; "how dare you!" All the stifled resentment broke into flame.

"Then," she added, shamelessly, "we shall see whom he obeys to-night!"

I caught my candle up, pointing to the door.

"Go!" I said, breathlessly; "go, at once!"

She laughed aloud then, but the wind caught her voice and drew it into a mingled wail that was drowned in a crash which shook the house to its foundations, and there followed the reverberating roar of waters like to which there is no other sound, unless it shall be the united rebellion of waves on that day when there is no more sea.

She shrieked, springing to my side and cowering.

Aunt Hannah stood in the doorway, her old face full of the indomitable courage which the strong soul rallies in need.

"If the old cave goes——" she called, for our voices were far away, but I understood, while wrapping her in a shawl. The house had been built by a master smuggler, and the cellar was the first of a chain of subterranean chambers, extending to the river beyond. If the walls of the first gave way——

Through the echo of Celeste's shriek, a voice shouted hoarsely. I sprang to the steps, conscious of her cry:

"It is he!"

I slid the bolt of the hall-door, which flung wide, and the water nearly swept me off my feet, but Celeste leaped past me and threw herself forward in the darkness. I discerned a figure catch her in his arms, and heard his voice call:

"Beloved! The boat!—quick!"

Then I knew that my house was built upon sand.

When I look back to that night—to the world of black water and roaring sound around us—I can recall no physical fear. I pulled hard at the oar, experiencing intense relief at this outlet for pent force, but in the face of that realization which had been forced upon me in the dark this lesser feeling was as nothing. Old Dilsy crouched in the boat's bottom beside Celeste, muttering prayers and ejaculations, and Aunt Hannah sat beside me, and once or twice I received the pressure of her hand upon my arm. Time was uncalculated, and how long Pen McCrae and I battled in the dark to reach the hill back of that which had been our own land, I never knew, for it was dawn when together we pushed and dragged the boat into the sand and lashed it to a tree. Then he came to me, but I pointed to Celeste, who lay in the boat, white of face and with closed eyes.

"Go to her!" I said, and busied myself with Aunt Hannah.

When he had gathered driftwood to make a place on which to lay Celeste, she seemed to fall asleep immediately. Then he stood before me, pallid and spent.

"Come," he said, "you must lean against me and rest. God! what a woman you are, Bethesda!"

I clasped the pine-tree, against which I leaned, and gazed over the muddy expanse of water and across that night which had divided us.

"I rest here," I said.

His face was drawn and haggard.

"What does it mean? You haven't spoken to me since yesterday! Answer me!" He caught my arm masterfully. "What has come between us? Look at me, Bethesda!"

He pointed to the spot where the water was already receding from our roof, and to the muddy torrent with its rushing mass of logs, branches and débris, clogging the tide.

"Haven't we been through that together—only God's mercy knows how! Answer me!"

I clung to the tree as for strength to face him and the world of dawn and wreckage about him. It was no time for dissembling, but for the bared blade and the open heart.

"I heard what you called her. Go to her! Do you think I want what is given to another?"

"What? I do not understand!" he insisted. But suddenly I broke away.

"Oh, go!" I cried, fiercely. "Go away from me, I never want to see you again!"

He dropped my hands, drawing away from me; and as he did so Celeste's laugh rang between us.

She stood swaying and wind-blown, staring over our heads and laughing wildly.

"To the boat! I am afraid—you shall take me!—me, not her! 'Bethesda, beloved!' Never mind her, you shall take me to the boat!"

He gathered her up as she had been a baby and wrapped her in his coat. Then, I saw a boat across the river striving to put off to us.

Fortunately, the elasticity and endurance of the human being is one of nature's marvels, and Aunt Hannah and I were wrought of sturdy stuff. After a day and night, housed and warmed with the McCraes, we were little the worse for the night of flood and peril, through which other women have lived before us. But not so Celeste. Easily excited to fever and delirium, she was ill for several days, during which I did not leave her, but counted the hours since I drove him from me with stern words, for in my ears there rang her cry:

" 'Bethesda, beloved!' 'Bethesda, beloved!' "

I had no word from him, for he was out all day repairing the wreck made by the flood, but on the third night the fever left Celeste, and although weak she was again herself—whimsical, cynical, petulant.

"My faith! I shall pack my trunk to-morrow," she exclaimed, from the pillows where she lay, wrapped in a borrowed scarlet robe. "I would be burnt as a witch, if need be, but drowned—never! Ugh, the coldness of it! Bethesda, what a ghost you are!" She rose weakly on her elbow and inspected me, then fell back. "And I thought you growing handsome! Come nearer!"

I humored her, after the manner of treating with a sick child, but the sickness had left her, and she seized my wrist, and scanned me with her shrewd eyes, then muttered in French to herself:

" 'Tis the way with big people. Ma vie! You turn the knife in and it grinds! Give me my slippers!"

I protested, but have them she would, and got out of bed in spite of me.

"Peste! You are ever fearful of the things one need not fear! Now I, when I am ill I am ill—mais je meurs!—but when I live, I live! To-morrow, I shall live again! And I go to the city the day after. It was so on the night of——" She stopped. There were doubtless pages of Celeste's history unwritten for our quieter reading. "I was ill once, madly ill for several days, but I am the Temperament." She laughed, and ensconced herself in a great-chair before the fire. "Now let me see you, my excellent big Bethesda!" She lay looking at me, her eyes slits of dark, her face white and witchlike. "Come nearer!"

I locked my hands now, and stood apart, watching, and she laughed softly.

"O wise Bethesda—for you will not love me! O foolish that you do not love easily! Where is your young doctor?"

I turned quickly toward the door. At least, I was not bound to listen. But she arrested me, starting up, catching my sleeve, her face lifted with a flash of something I never saw there before. It was the true being that suddenly unveiled itself—the hungry, longing child.

"You shall hear me! Am I blind? Am I of a denseness? You hate me! You do not need love as I do! You stand alone upon your own strength. I stand alone, and, mon dieu, I must have one to love me! Am I not one solitaire? A dancer's child? Have I not been a dependant?" I thought she was lashing herself into a rage, but a sob shook her. "It is not the love of which you think that I want. My faith, the love of man, what is it? The sands of the sea, that slip through one's hand! It is not that, but of a mother—of a one who bears with me because I am her own—who loves me!" I drew nearer, amazed, repentant. "Oh, ma vie! I love, yes! But 'tis not he, your young doctor. I love one who adores me, but I shall not marry him, for my love is not of that kind. I am the artist. I am to enter an engagement this month to tour, to dance!" She paused and drew my hand

down to her hot face. "He adores you, the young doctor. Ma foi! He thought it was you in the dark and was for letting me drop in the water! But I clung to him. 'Bethesda, beloved!' It was all he could say!" She laughed softly. "It was not I, ma chère, but you, that the excellent young man was for bearing to the boat! Me! I could have drowned like the cattle for all of him. How I struggled to make him carry me! But I knew it not. Fear makes me mad." Suddenly she clung to me, sobs shaking her, arms flung around me as I knelt.

"Oh, you would make a good mother, Bethesda! I would have a mother! You have not loved me—you know not love after my manner. You have not that in you, good and still and wise, which burns to fury and makes all of a beauty and intensity, or all of a blackness or the white flame of death!"

Had I not?

For the first time in our lives, my arms held her, something strange and deep and tender stirred me, and perhaps the alien circles of our natures touched. I rocked her gently, while she sobbed, her face against my breast, nestling closely, murmuring words upward.

"That is well—hold me close, Bethesda! 'Tis like a mother." Her hand stroked my face. "She is beautiful, this Bethesda! Ah, do not be so proud and cold—it is not best! He loves you, even as that other loves me, chérie! And me? Perhaps she will love me yet, my Bethesda."

Still murmuring, she fell asleep.

When Aunt Hannah opened the door softly, she stopped and stood gazing at us—I kneeling, my arms around Celeste, she asleep. Then Aunt Hannah smiled as if upon something for which she had waited, and closing the door, beckoned me.

I slipped a pillow under Celeste's head, and went to her.

"Pen sends you this; he is waiting," she said.

"Bethesda, beloved, I cannot pass another night without the knowledge of peace, at least, between us, if not the certainty of more. For I love you until you mean life and future and hope to me. I beg you, answer me to-night."

This was what I read by the candlelight.

The fire blazed up, and above it a low mirror, framed in asparagus-boughs, sent back the image of a tall white figure, gold of head, radiant of eyes, smiling of lips. Aunt Hannah read me through the lifting of the veil of the heart.

"Go to him, girl! Go to him!" she said. I smiled back at her, and turned to touch Celeste's face with my lips. Then, my hand upon the door, the old words surged through my mind:

"For, 'whereas the love of woman is a certain thing, the love of man is an uncertain thing; . . . and whereas a woman is never content until she is bound——'" Yet, I laughed with the very joy of youth's fearlessness that was upon me, and went down, as thousands have done before me, to where a lover waited.