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When Love is Love



WHEN LOVE
IS LOVE



A N O V E L

BY

KATE LANGLEY BOSHER



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1904

TO MY MOTHER

CHAPTER I

The little clock on the mantel struck two very softly. The big clock in the church nearby rang out the number loudly, while from the floor below the two strokes sounded clear and distinct.

Notwithstanding this, no sign of separating for the night was made by the occupants of the room in which the first clock had struck, for so eagerly were they discussing a remarkable thing that had happened to one of their number, that the lateness of the hour passed unnoticed, or with no comment made upon it.

"If we were to read about this in a book we would think it a highly-colored piece of fiction," said the youngest looking of the quartet, leaning forward and unfastening the buttons of her shoes as she spoke. "I always did want to be like somebody in a book, and to be sister to somebody is next to being it yourself. Hurrah for the old maid!" and she threw first one shoe and then the other in the air, and followed it with her hat, which, however, she did aim toward the couch.

"Let me see it again, Portia," said the brunette of the party, a tall, slender girl, with

earnest, deep-set eyes. "It sounds so newspaperish that I can't exactly take it in."

She took the paper held out to her and scanned it closely.

"Thirty thousand dollars and twenty acres of land don't make a Lady Cræsus of anybody, but it's a lift in that direction."

She stopped and held the lawyer-like looking document closer to the light, while Virginia, balancing herself upon the piano stool, clasped her hands behind her head and watched her intently, as if afraid some flaw might be found in this wonderful paper which had been brought so unexpectedly to her sister that night.

"What time did he bring it, Portia?" asked Joyce, poking the dead coals in the grate energetically. "No, you can't have this poker. I don't blame you for letting the fire go out. If I'd had thirty thousand dollars and twenty acres of land overlooking the Hudson River left me, I'd let anything go out; but as I'm not in it, my flesh and blood requires heat," and she punched the coals so vigorously that the few faint sparks left in them flickered entirely away.

The one they called Portia went over to the register and opened it, then came back and put her hand lightly on Joyce's shoulder.

"You are in it, dear. You and Virginia and Elizabeth are in it just as much as I, but we must not talk about it any more to-night. For nearly three hours we've been going over it,

and we've got the rest of our lives in which to enjoy it, and now every one of you must go to bed."

"But can't we do something first in honor of the occasion?" protested Elizabeth. "Can't we celebrate in some way? I suppose it wouldn't do to drink to the old lady's health as long as she is dead, but we can drink to her departure. Wait a minute."

She slipped out of the room and was back again almost instantly, with a bottle in her hand.

"Black Mammy gave it to me when I first left home," she explained, holding it up. "She made it herself, and said it was good for pains and things. I don't know what it is," she went on, pressing the bottle between her knees and pulling with all her might on the cork-screw, "but I know it's good. I think it's apple brandy, but it may just as likely be anything else. I'm not an authority on drinks, but drunk this must be to-night."

She poured some of the contents of the bottle into four little glasses and handed one to each of the girls, who involuntarily sniffed it before tasting.

"I think it's blackberry wine," said Virginia. "I took some once when I was sick, and it smelt just like this."

"It's scuppernong," said Joyce, and she held her glass up to the light and surveyed it critically.

“Well, it’s all right, whatever it is,” interrupted Elizabeth. “But you haven’t guessed, Portia.”

Portia smiled slightly.

“It’s huckleberry bounce, and it’s a pity to waste it; but if Elizabeth insists we can each take a little. What is the toast, Elizabeth?” and Portia held her glass expectantly.

“To old maids in general, and this deceased one in particular! May she find above, all she missed below.”

“And may all spinsters who have money remember others who have none!” added Joyce, taking a good mouthful. “Next.”

“To lonely ladies—otherwise, old maids! May there be no boarding-houses in heaven.” Virginia drained her glass. “Now, Portia, it’s your turn.”

The latter smiled slightly again.

“You’ve given me an idea,” she said, and she touched each glass lightly with her own.

“To Spinstervilla, the future home of four maiden ladies! May it resist love, refuse matrimony, and belong to just us for a while—a little while at least.”

The glasses were touched to lips as if not understanding, and then Virginia’s fell to the floor.

“Do you mean we’re going to have a home of our own—a real home? Is that what you mean, Portia?” and Virginia tried hard to keep her voice from trembling.

The older sister took the younger one in her arms for just a minute and kissed the rippling brown hair softly.

“That is what I hope,” she said gently; “and now to bed, every one of you. To-morrow we will begin again, but not another word to-night.”

CHAPTER II

It was a remarkable thing that had happened, and the happening meant much, very much, to those most nearly affected by it.

The girls had gone to the opera, and Portia, glad to have a quiet evening alone, had just seated herself comfortably with a book when some one knocked at the door. At first she hesitated to say come in. She was very tired, and to lose this hour or two of rest was irritating.

The handle of the door turned, however, and a head was poked cautiously inside.

"What's the matter? Can't I come in?" said a voice, and before Portia could answer, the owner of it was inside the room and shaking hands with her in an unusual fashion and with very unnecessary energy.

"The girls are out, Brydon," she said, smiling a little at his peculiar greeting, "and I'm unutterably stupid, so please don't stay."

For reply, her visitor tossed his overcoat on a chair opposite and pulled out a paper from an inside pocket and laid it on the table.

"I'm in luck that you're by yourself," he said, coming over and pushing her into a big chair.

“Sit down. I know you’re dead tired, but I’ve something here that will make you forget it,” and he picked up the paper he had just put down and tossed it in the air. “I jumped the Perrys’ dinner to-night as soon as I decently could,” he continued, “and I’ve an engagement at 10.30, but I had to tell you about it first,” and again the mysterious paper was taken up, opened, glanced over and once more folded carefully; but this time he did not put it out of his hands.

“Tell me about what?” asked Portia a little nervously. “Has anything happened?”

Brydon laughed joyously.

“A very nice thing has happened, I think. I’ve a splendid piece of news for you, my lady. It isn’t such a big thing, but it will be such a help, and I’m so tremendously glad for you that if it were Christmas or the Fourth of July I’d go out and fire off something, but as it’s early October I’ll take it out in a smoke. May I?”

He went over to the mantel, and lighting a cigar took a whiff, then laid it down and came back to the table.

“You remember the Miss Carter who died last week?” he began slowly. “Well, it is about her that I have come to tell you something to-night.”

A relieved look broke over Portia’s face. “You frightened me, Brydon. You looked so important and mysterious when you came in

that I thought something was the matter. Has poor old Miss Carter left me her parrot?" And she leaned back carelessly.

Brydon laughed joyously again.

"She has for a fact; but you needn't worry. The parrot died the day after the funeral."

Portia's look of amazement was sobering and Brydon brought his chair up closer to hers.

"I don't wonder you're shocked. It takes nerve to leave a parrot to any one. However, old Miss Carter did the decent thing. The parrot wasn't the only remembrance she left you. To Virginia she bequeathes, as she expresses it, her two diamond rings and a thousand dollars with which to buy her wedding clothes, and to you thirty thousand dollars' worth of United States bonds and twenty acres of land overlooking the Hudson River."

Brydon stopped, for the sudden whiteness of Portia's face frightened him. He got up and stood in front of her, then began to shake her hands vigorously.

"Get that look off your face, Portia, and smile, laugh, cry, hurrah, or do something to show your appreciation of the old lady's love for you! I thought I had such a jolly piece of news for you that you'd dance with delight, and you look, instead, like a ghost. Can't you say something, do something, make some sort of a noise?"

Portia's throat made a little gurgling sound and the color came slowly back in her face, but

for a moment she could not speak; then she looked up so appealingly in Brydon's face that the latter felt his heart-strings pulled tightly.

"Are you sure, very sure, there is no mistake about this, Brydon?"

"Very sure, Miss Deming," and he bowed as if to a new and desirable client. "Parker let me make a copy of that part of the will relating to you and Virginia, and I've brought it up for you to read over at your pleasure. Parker was Miss Carter's lawyer and had charge of her estate. She had a pretty big pile of money, I believe, and left most of it to hospitals and things, but the little clause about you will be her best hope of heaven.

"I'll see you to-morrow and talk to you more fully about it," he went on presently. "Didn't have but ten minutes to-night, but I wanted you to know as soon as possible. The will was just probated to-day, and I told Parker I'd personally notify you concerning your part in it." He held out his hand to say good-night.

"The tide has turned at last," he said cheerily. "You've been the pluckiest woman God ever made, Portia, and it's time for the turning; good-night," and in a moment he was gone.

And Portia, standing with the paper in her hands, waited until she heard his footsteps in the street below before she began to read the copy of the will which he had left with her, and which would make so great and wonderful a change in her life.

CHAPTER III

Born of a name old and honored, into an atmosphere of culture inherited from generations of distinguished ancestors, with health and beauty in full measure and with every resource at her command to develop a naturally brilliant mind, Portia Deming stood on her twenty-third birthday upon the threshold of a future which promised but an ever-widening increase of the happiness of the past. On her twenty-fourth she was in New York struggling to earn her daily bread.

The revolution had been so sudden, so complete, that henceforth the old life belonged to a woman that was dead—the new one to a creature who was strange to herself. In one year death had claimed, almost upon the eve of her wedding day, the man she was to have married. Three months later her father had died, and in settling up the estate it was discovered that bad investments had caused heavy shrinkages in his assets, and from being a rich woman she found herself a poor one.

The beautiful colonial home, which for generations had been lived in by the Demings, was for a few months after her father's death still

hers; but at the end of that time came the final toss of fate, and it was burned to the ground, with little saved but the plate and portraits and a few pieces of furniture.

There was nothing now to be taken save Virginia, the little sister. And had it not been for this little sister, who had been put into her arms when her mother died a few days after the baby's birth, she would gladly have ended the pain of it all and lain down in the church-yard by the side of those she had so passionately loved, and who had loved her so passionately in return—but for her she must live and work.

The old plantation home in Virginia was now a thing of the past, and the place intolerable through its associations. So with a horror of what life would mean there under new conditions, she left it, and in the heart of New York sought, with the throb and stir and action of its restless life, to dull the bitter memories which so completely filled her that they sometimes threatened reason itself.

Virginia, who was twelve years younger than Portia, was put in a school outside the city, and the struggle to live began in earnest when it was found that their small amount of money would be but little more than sufficient to educate and give her the musical training necessary to properly develop the voice which was later to be her means of livelihood.

The new existence began for Portia in a typical boarding-house, where everything she most

hated was predominantly conspicuous, and where the people were equally as hopeless as the place. But in proud endurance she made no comment or let any one imagine she was otherwise than content with her present surroundings, and in silence lived her life apart.

Loving the beautiful things of life, craving its brilliant and cultured side, accustomed to its refinements and luxuries, these new experiences cut into the quick of her soul, and she knew not how to adapt herself to them. Beyond a mere bowing acquaintance she knew only one woman in the house besides the landlady.

She had seen something of this one because their rooms adjoined and because she was sick, and as Portia thought rather poor and friendless; but with the others there was nothing in common and she kept herself aloof, scarcely knowing the names of those who sat at the table with her.

She had begun at once to work with her pen, and night after night she wrote steadily, carefully, brilliantly, and day after day her work was—courteously sometimes, discourteously at others—returned to her, and the future looked very dark.

With dogged persistency she kept on, but at the end of her first year she had not had a single article accepted, and the realization was inevitable that she had made a splendid success of failure.

“Write something that will make people feel, Portia,” said Virginia one day, “and let some-

body else make them just think. Play some kind of a tune on their hearts and let their heads alone for a while. If I knew how to write, I think that's what I'd do."

With characteristic common sense, Portia faced her failure bravely. Virginia was right. To write of happiness when life had denied it; of joy when there was no joy; of love when love was dead, had seemed beyond her, and in choosing her subjects she had taken those which were farthest from the experiences closest to her, and the right ring was lacking in everything she had written. That she wrote well she knew, equally as well as many others, but no better; and until she could do something more forcibly, or more originally, or more desirably than it had yet been done, she had no right, perhaps, to hope for a hearing.

After Virginia left, she took the piles of manuscript, which represented the work of a year, and filled the grate to the full with them; and as she watched them blaze and burn and blacken, she knew that hope and ambition and pride were being put to a test that was wormwood and gall to her nature, and she was conscious of being tired—tired unto death of the fight she was making with life.

After a while she took Virginia's advice, however, and her first accepted manuscript was a story for children, a story based upon one that had been told her in her own childhood, and from that time on she realized she had

found the field in which she could do her best work. It was not the field she would have chosen, but it was one she could make a success of, for deep down in her heart was a passionate love for babyhood and little children, and the vitality and freshness she had felt were lacking before came into her work, and came unconsciously and naturally.

With the first slight wedge of success came after a while a little larger one, and she was given a position on the staff of the magazine for little folks which had accepted her first article. The salary was not large, but the place put her in touch with other writers and promised to be a sort of training school, and she accepted it gladly, attending faithfully to its duties by day, and late into the night writing for other papers and periodicals, and with a slow but ever-increasing measure of success.

Three years had been passed in this way, and it was at the beginning of the fourth that she one day met her cousin, Brydon Field, face to face on the street. She had been looking in a store window, and turning saw him staring at her with such doubt and wonder and surprise in his eyes that she smiled and held out her hand and spoke to him.

Brydon never exactly forgave her for those years spent in the city without his knowledge. It cut deeper than Portia guessed that she should think the change in her condition would make a change in his friendship, and the hurt

was long in healing, that she had so treated him and placed him with the rest.

After a few days his mother, Portia's aunt, called—drove up in her handsome brougham—and greeted her with all the polite surprise the occasion justified, and after she had gone Portia took up her card and smiled, smiled at the name upon it and what it represented in New York society. She perfectly understood that her aunt's world and her world were now two very different places, and that their paths would continue to diverge was but the natural sequence of their environment.

Her aunt had always been intolerable to Portia. She had sold her birthright of beauty and blood for a million-dollar mess of pottage, and the transaction had seared her soul unbecomingly. That she could be the mother of Brydon was a misfit of nature. Brydon rang true ever, but his lady-mother was a snob, and Portia was ashamed of her, and as she tore her card up and threw it away she mentally disposed of her aunt in much the same manner.

The years went by and Portia did better and better work, and her pen-name gradually became a familiar one in the literary world. She still wrote mostly for children, however, and it was while looking for some one to illustrate a volume of her stories that she stumbled upon Joyce, and the acquaintance became friendship immediately through one of those sudden currents which cause instant recognition of one's own kind.

Joyce and Elizabeth were strugglers also, and by a happy accident they had made together the plunge from sheltered Southern homes into the whirl of New York life, and when Portia found them both were pretty well spent in their efforts to keep their feet in the straight and narrow path that would not lead to success, and both were thinking miserably of turning them southwards again.

"Of course I will illustrate your work," said Joyce when Portia approached her. "I would paint road fences just now and only charge half price for it; but how did you find me?"

Portia told her, and, like all true Southerners, before they separated each had discovered that they knew many of the other's relatives, and without further formality they proceeded to be friends.

Joyce was a South Carolinian, Elizabeth a Georgian. They had met on the train on their way to the American Mecca, and as each was desperately lonely and afraid, they had joined forces and together had worked and waited—and not yet won—when discovered by Portia. Both were parentless and poor, and Portia's understanding heart went out to them strongly when she saw the splendid fight they were making. And before they exactly understood what the change would mean, they found themselves living together in an apartment with some pretense of home about it, and with some promise of success in the new line of work which each was about to begin.

CHAPTER IV

It was a happy coincidence that Portia should have stumbled across Joyce and Elizabeth just as Virginia's school life was to end. A boarding-house existence was not meant for Virginia, and the hope of a home for her was one that Portia had long been secretly cherishing in her heart.

The change in the manner of living was just in time for the others also, for Elizabeth's courage and cheerfulness had been tested almost beyond human endurance, and Joyce's sunny temperament and confident faith were daily becoming more and more beclouded by the monotony of their failure to do the right thing.

Virginia was eighteen when her college life ended, and the record she left behind her was one of which Portia was very proud. In all her classes she had done fine work; but it was to her music she had given her best energies, and the future held out to her tempting possibilities in the way of a musical career.

She was wiser than her masters, for though they predicted for her a success, after a few more years of study, that would startle the American world if she would consent to go in

for opera, she only shook her head and laughed and refused to consider it.

"I have no talent for opera, and no taste for the life," she had said, "and if I tried it I should fail. I am going in for oratorio and church music, and you will see that I am right." And urge, plead, protest as they might, she was never turned from her purpose.

They were very earnest bread winners—these four young women who found themselves living together after a very short acquaintance; but that each had entered her right field of work when first they joined forces, was by no means certain.

Elizabeth was a painter of pictures who would never be an artist. Her color sense was faulty, her creative faculty limited, and her drawing too absolutely perfect to be other than mechanical; and yet for years she had studied and worked persistently, and never once admitted she was on the wrong road to the success she was so determined to win.

To copy well, or to make a mechanical design with any degree of accuracy was almost impossible with Joyce, but her baby pictures were full of grace and charm and beauty of pose; her flowers and animals and bits of illustration showed life and power; and her coloring was deliciously warm and soft and tender. But up to the time Portia found her she had been floundering painfully in black and white, giving only odd moments to the work for which

she had positive genius, and back-breaking hours daily to that for which she had barely ordinary capacity.

Both Elizabeth and Joyce had been too close to their work to see its real faults, and at first they were hardly ready to accept the change which Portia most promptly pointed out was necessary to be made if they wished to succeed.

“But one can make so much money in industrial work,” protested Joyce when the matter was being talked over with her. “I’m no artist, Portia; I never expect to paint pictures. But I can draw a little, and I want to make money. Oh, isn’t it horrible to be so poor! I know a girl who gets a big salary designing for just one house here in New York, and if I could make what she does I’d sell my whole artistic nature and design beer bottles and flower pots and kitchen forks, or anything else for which there was a demand, for I must make money—I must!”

“But you will never make it along industrial lines, dear,” answered Portia. “And it is because I want to help you that I am hurting you by telling you this. We each have our lessons to learn. I have had mine and a very bitter one it was, but if I had not learned it I would not be here to-day. You have more than talent for a certain kind of work, but not for the kind you have mistakenly chosen. You and Elizabeth have strangely mixed your gifts up, and if you don’t face the truth and find out where the diffi-

culty lies, you will be failures, both of you; and you shall not be that if I can help you, even if I hurt you in the helping."

For a while Joyce had sat in silence, nibbling the end of her pencil, then she got up impulsively and threw it out of the window.

"I don't deserve your interest and care and patience," she said a little brokenly, "and I'm horribly stubborn and silly I know; but I did think there was a fortune in door-knobs and chandeliers and wall-paper, and all that sort of thing, and I wanted to get rich and stop this struggling. I'm so tired of being poor and buying substitutes for what I really want; and to think I've wasted all these years on a mistake is—"

She stopped abruptly and her lips quivered. She bit them to keep them still, then walked over to the table on which lay her drawing materials, and began to tear up one of her designs.

Portia put out her hand and stopped her.

"Give it to me," she said kindly; "I want to keep some proof of my belief that you were not meant for this kind of thing. A year from now you can see it again, and if you do not agree with me, I will beg your pardon and see that it brings a good price."

For some time they sat together and talked; talked of all sorts of possibilities, of ways and means, of how the best preparation should be made for the work Joyce consented to try. And

then Portia showed her a magazine advertisement which offered a prize for the best design for a wedding gown, and as she did so she laughed to see the light that came in her eyes.

“Door-knobs and andirons and wall-paper would never make you look like that, my lady,” she said brightly. “You were meant to create, not copy; to originate, not develop, and now if you win this prize I think there is a chance of your getting something permanent from the firm which offers it. This may not be high art, but if it fills a need it will perhaps open the way to another line of work which may be an advance upon this. One of the hardest things in life to accept is that success is but continual development. It is rarely reached at a leap, and you, and I, and all the world must serve our apprenticeship faithfully if in the end we would win anything worth having.”

To both Portia’s and Virginia’s surprise, after some slight protest, Elizabeth took much more readily than they had expected the former’s suggestion that she devote herself to industrial work and for the present, at least, give up oil.

“I have known for some time it was all a mistake my trying to paint,” she said when talking it over; “but my stubborn pride refused to admit I was beaten. I didn’t even love it, though I pretended to; but this I do love,” and she held up a piece of paper with a tall antique mantel drawn upon it. “I’ve a thousand de-

signs in my head which are buzzing to get out, and if they ever amount to anything I will owe it to you both for turning me around and starting me in the right direction." And Elizabeth—proud, independent, cynical, and warm-hearted to an intense degree—walked abruptly out of the room, lest she show too plainly how deeply she felt the mistakes and failures of her years of work and worry.

The summer passed quietly, and the fall opened with a fair measure of success for each. Virginia was still working hard at her music, but in addition to her studying she was earning a comfortable income from the church and concert engagements which she had been fortunate enough to make almost immediately. The peculiar quality of her voice, with its exquisite tenderness and richness, had been recognized at once, and the fear of the future was being lifted largely from Portia's heart as she realized that if health and strength continued, Virginia would soon be able to make her own terms in the musical world which wanted that which she had to give.

Elizabeth, too, had been fortunate with her antique furniture designs, many of which were made from the originals she remembered so well in her Southern home, or in the homes of her friends, and in addition to other work she was regularly employed by a large house in the city to do some designing along special lines for their particular use.

Joyce's child-like delight in winning the prize for the wedding gown was increased tenfold by an order from the firm which gave it, which paid her well; and what with some illustrations to be made for holiday work, and a magazine cover that had been accepted, she was radiantly happy.

Portia was happy, too, for her book was having a good sale and the future looked less formidable than it had done for years past. There was no prospect of rest, however, for the livelihood of each depended almost entirely upon her own labors, and until something could be laid aside, persistent and patient work must be continued.

Their first winter together began happily, but before it was over a change had to be made in their apartments; and in the four years that followed it was found necessary to make frequent changes in household arrangements, with the result that each was thoroughly tired of this unsettled and unsatisfactory manner of life.

When, therefore, Brydon Field came with the wonderful news of Portia's legacy, it was at a point when they were longing unutterably for a home where light and air and sunshine were not at such a costly premium, and where they could stretch out their arms without knocking over something or somebody; and where, too, the dust and noise and restless life of the city could be forgotten in the sweep of fields and the fragrance of fresh flowers.

The four years together had done much for the development of each. Success and failure had played a part in the work of all four, but success had won, and each was beginning to feel that her name stood for something in the particular world in which she worked, and that recognition had been honestly won.

They rarely ever spoke to outsiders of their first struggles and early efforts. "People are not interested in other people's troubles," Virginia said wisely one evening as they were laughing over some of the days that had been so dark and hopeless in the beginning of their new life. "We like to look at those who have gotten on top, or at least to a point high enough to be visible, just to see if they have any extra hands or feet. But how they got there, or if they hurt those same hands and feet in doing it, isn't interesting. Everybody has his own share of struggles, and anybody else's can be dispensed with," saying which she stretched out full length on the couch and clasped her hands under her head, and watched a fly crawl lazily along the ceiling.

"You've been reading 'The Ways of the World,'" said Joyce laughing. "Horrible, isn't it?"

"Horrible because it's so deadly true. People don't even want to read about the experiences of those who fight for life inch by inch. Details are superfluous, it seems, except in matters of marriage and dinner parties. There are

some things one doesn't care to have a search-light thrown on, and the man or woman who writes or talks too much about the dreary side of life will surely be avoided after a while."

"Right, Miss Deming, quite right; though you are the best listener to other people's woes I ever stumbled across," and Joyce threw a shawl over Virginia's feet and tucked it warmly around them.

The latter smiled and turned over on her side.

"You have never poured any of yours into my waiting ears, though I've been constantly ready to receive them. However, I hope they won't be long or numerous. It would be a mistake for you to have woes and things, Joyce—you weren't made for them." And Virginia put her hand under her cheek and looked at her critically and with a warm light of love in her eyes.

"No beaux, no woes," laughed Joyce. "By avoiding the former, I dispense with the latter. Be wise enough to follow my example and keep the bloom on your cheek."

Portia put down the magazine she was reading and turned to Virginia.

"Do you know what day this is, dear?" she asked, handing her a calendar. "Exactly ten years ago to-night we reached New York," she continued, turning to the others. "Virginia was just a little girl, and now—"

“She’s an old maid,” interrupted Virginia; “twenty-two and still earning her living, and likely to keep it up.”

She sat up as she spoke, and looked at the calendar carefully. Ten years was a good part of one’s life. She glanced at Portia and her throat grew tight.

“We would not care to tell all the experiences of that time, would we?” laughed the latter, taking the calendar out of Virginia’s hands. “Two years of it were spent at Mrs. Johnson’s boarding-house, two in Mrs. Register’s, one at ‘The Madison,’ and one at ‘The Waverly,’ and four in various spots, since we formed our association for pleasure, profit, and protection. I think a volume could be written of each place.”

She took up her magazine as if to continue her article, but Virginia put her hand upon it.

“I wish you could have seen her when she first came to New York,” she said, turning to Joyce as if she had not heard the last words. “She was so beautiful”—and she looked at Portia gravely.

“‘Was beautiful?’ ” repeated Joyce. “‘Was beautiful?’ Portia is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and the handsomest and most patrician. Some day I am going to paint your picture and call it ‘The Aristocrat’—may I?” and Joyce sat down suddenly upon the stool at Portia’s feet and rested her arms in her lap.

Not even a faint flicker of color came into Portia’s face at Joyce’s extravagant words.

"There is a little rhyme you should remember, dear," she said quietly, running her hand gently through the soft waves of red-brown hair.

"'Lest men believe your tale untrue,
Keep probability in view.'

"A woman of nearly thirty-five, whose weight is barely an hundred and twenty pounds, with a height of five feet eight, would hardly be considered handsome," and she smiled good-naturedly. "A white-haired woman, too. I don't believe even Virginia remembers when my hair was as black as Elizabeth's. I have almost forgotten it myself."

"I remember perfectly," interrupted Virginia. "It began to turn after—just before we left home, and it turned white all at once. Don't you know how people used to stare at you, and once old Miss Carpenter asked you whether it was sickness or trouble or age, and you said age. You were twenty-seven at the time. I remember that too."

"It is the most perfect white hair I have ever seen," said Elizabeth, who was supposed to be reading, "and Joyce is right. It doesn't matter that you don't know how beautiful you are, but what she says is true. You radiate something, just like Virginia sings—something one feels even more than one sees. I have often wondered what it is," and she looked at Portia

as a scientist would a rare specimen he had long been puzzling over.

Portia raised her hand protestingly.

“Don’t,” she said quietly. “The Portia that once was glad to be beautiful is dead—the one you know is only her shadow. Where is your design for the chandeliers, Elizabeth; and the miniature you have made of Mrs. Craigmore’s baby, Joyce? You have not shown them to me,” and she turned down the light a little and shaded it so it would not fall on Virginia’s face.

The latter shook her head at the two girls as a signal to change the conversation. As intimate and tender and untiring as Portia ever was to them, the past was a subject she never mentioned. Nor would she suffer its discussion by the others, and if by chance it was ever brought up she would talk of something else, and in a way that was always understood.

They knew very fully the life that had been lived in New York, but only from Virginia had they heard anything concerning the one spent in their Southern home. The great sorrows that had so colored and changed her life had never been mentioned by Portia. The chapters of love and hope which they represented were closed forever, and only the memory of what might have been was left to sometimes surge over her and so torture her, that she thanked God for the struggle of earning her daily bread, for that, at least, denied her the time to dwell upon the past.

CHAPTER V

Every detail of Portia's acquaintance with the eccentric spinster had to be told again and again to Joyce and Elizabeth on the day after the news of the legacy had been received; and though there was little to tell, its interest was not diminished by its meagreness.

After Miss Carter left the boarding-house where Portia and Virginia had first met her, they had seen but little of her. Only an occasional visit kept them in touch with one another, and that she should have remembered them in her will was but another evidence of the happening of the unexpected. Portia had been kind to her because she thought her feeble and friendless, but never had she talked to her of her past life or the uncertainties of the new one she was entering; and that she was interested in either was a thought that had not occurred to her.

From Virginia, however, Miss Carter had learned the story of Portia's life, drawing it out question by question until she knew all about the beautiful old home in Virginia which had been burned to the ground; knew of the loss of their money, and the death first of Portia's be-

trothed and later of her father; and knew also how bravely and proudly these reverses had been borne, and with no word of complaint ever uttered concerning them.

All this and more Virginia had told her, but not for years had she remembered the telling. And not until the will had been read over and over again did she recall the questions that Miss Carter used to ask her concerning their former life in the South and their outlook for the one in the North.

“That is one time my tongue didn’t make trouble,” she said gaily the morning after Brydon had brought the news of the will, “and I’m very much obliged to my unruly member, very much obliged,” and she went over to the piano and played a few bars vigorously.

“St. James calls that woman’s weapon many other things besides an unruly member—that’s his mild term for it,” said Joyce, sitting down in her favorite position in front of the fire and holding out her hands to the blaze. “I suppose he was thinking about Virginians’ tongues when he said they boasteth great things. You can always count on a Virginian doing good work in that direction,” and she looked at Virginia teasingly.

“Right,” replied the latter promptly. “Everybody knows they have so much more to boast about than other people,” and she struck the opening bars of “Dixie,” at the same time throwing a kiss at Joyce good-naturedly.

Joyce laughed in spite of herself. Virginia's love for Virginia and Virginians had been one of her most pronounced characteristics from childhood, and though herself intensely loyal and devoted to her State, Portia sometimes marveled at the passionate love that Virginia felt for it. Its history and traditions, its principles and standards, she had carefully taught her, believing her duty unfulfilled did she not train her in the ideals of the women of her race, and impress her with the fact that hers was a noble heritage which only a noble life could wear worthily—and that the seed sown had fallen on receptive ground was admitted by all.

“Was Miss Carter a Virginian?” asked Joyce, after a moment. “The name sounds like it.”

“I don't know what she was. I hope she is an angel now—a nice, happy angel,” and Virginia settled herself on the rug by Joyce and gazed absently at the glowing coals.

The latter laughed indulgently.

“Next to being a Virginian it is most desirable to be an angel—is that it, Miss Deming?” She looked at her teasingly for a moment, then leaned over and gave her a sudden kiss. “You dear, delightful little provincial! To think of breathing New York air for ten years and still being so intensely local! You are hopeless and impossible; but I warn you now, if you ever change, we will part company forever.”

Before Virginia could answer, Portia came in from a visit to Brydon's office, and the ex-

pression on her face told without words that her visit had been satisfactory, and that all was well. Her eyes were bright, but there was a tired look in them—a worn, relaxed one that they had not often noticed before, and their hearts filled with a sharp fear.

Now that there was to be an easing of the strain, was overtaxed nature to rebel at last? Elizabeth pushed her gently in a chair and measured a spoonful of something from a bottle on the mantelpiece.

“Drink this,” she said, handing it to her. “I got it yesterday, and it’s warranted to bring the dead to life. Something inside of you isn’t running right, Portia, and just because you have had some money left you it isn’t necessary to get sick and fashionable at once.” She spoke lightly, but as she handed Portia the glass she scanned her face critically.

“Would you mind telling me what it is?” Portia asked, putting the glass down; “and why I am taking it? I am not sick, so I hope it isn’t medicine.”

“Oh no, it isn’t medicine,” laughed Elizabeth. “It’s a cure-all, good for things in general, and nothing in particular. However, it’s to be taken three times a day until I like your looks better, and until you are able to walk as far as you did when I first knew you—understand?”

Portia nodded and leaned back contentedly in her chair. She had grown suddenly tired,

and it was a relief to have something decided for her. Ten years of hard, almost unceasing labor was beginning to leave its impress upon her, and even had this legacy not come, something would have had to be done in the way of a long rest and perfect relaxation. But, thank God, it had come.

From early morning until Brydon came at night the change that this money was to make in their lives was discussed over and over again, and by supper time they were deep in the details of what the new home was to be. Brydon had only been in a few moments when Herr Runkel stopped by with a new piece of music for Virginia, and following him came Laurie with his plans for the Melrose Hospital for Elizabeth to look over. Later Irving dropped in for a cup of tea, and to each the wonderful news had to be repeated, until Joyce declared it had better not be mentioned again for fear it might wear out.

“But you’re not really going to keep that piece of property, Portia?” asked Brydon, holding his match and cigar in an interrogatory way before lighting the latter. “Thanks, here’s a light, Runkel. It’s worth good money, and if well invested would bring you a comfortable income. I don’t see how you can well afford to hold it—the taxes alone are a consideration.”

Virginia looked at Portia anxiously, but the latter was unmoved by Brydon’s words.

“I don’t know the full value of the property,” she said quietly, “but if it were twice what I

think it is, I still would not sell it—that is, all of it. I am going to build a house on it which will be a home for us all. Ever since I have been in New York I have dreamed of a home overlooking the Hudson, and now that the chance of having one is mine, I shall not exchange it for dollars and cents. I shall be glad to sell a few acres, however, and use the money for the house if you think that advisable.”

“Your house will hardly be in keeping with your location and with those around that part of the country if you only expect to spend a small amount of money on it. Levering’s cost \$120,000, I have heard, and the Doyles’ about \$75,000. Bryce, I know, spent over \$150,000 on his, and there are two or three others in that neighborhood equally as costly.”

Herr Runkel’s little eyes bulged bigger and bigger as Brydon spoke, then he got up impulsively and shook hands vigorously with Portia.

“I did not know it was in dat heavenly place dat de gude fortune has to you come,” he said joyously. “I haf been dere, and it is de most beautiful of all places what I haf seen since first I come to dis country, and you is a wise woman to keep it and live in it and breathe it, and I know de home you will haf will be of all de most perfect. Brecks and stone do not make all of home—it is many, many things else,” and overcome by his long speech, he bowed himself out in great confusion, leaving the others to talk more unreservedly concerning the possibili-

ties of having a home in a neighborhood so exclusive as to be considered beyond the reach of any but the very rich.

"You can get plenty of electricity there for all necessary purposes," said Irving, as they began to go into the details. "There is a big plant not very far off, and all the places in the neighborhood are supplied by it. The arrangements in some of those houses are simply perfect. I've been through them. If there's anything in my line I can do for you, let me know," and he put his arms around Portia and gave her a boyish, cousinly kiss. "Good-night, Mummy; awful sorry, but I've got to go—God bless you! I wish it were a million instead of this thousand or two," and with a nod to the others he was gone.

"We're a lucky lot," observed Joyce. "Mr. Brydon Field, of Parker & Field, will see that Miss Deming's interests are well looked after; Mr. Irving Mason, the promising young electrician, will have charge of all electrical matters connected with the new establishment, and Mr. Laurence Blair, of Royster, Blair & Co., will be the architect for the same."

"No, he won't," interrupted Portia, laughing a little at Joyce's enumeration. "The house I want is already designed. If Laurie will help me build it, however, I will be more than grateful," and she turned toward the young architect as if to thank him in advance for the help she knew so well was always at her disposal.

Before he could answer she had left the room, but was back again almost instantly.

"Here," she said quietly, holding out a picture to the group around the table; "here is the kind of house I want built," and she put the picture in Virginia's hands.

The latter glanced at it, and her face grew white. Without a word, she handed it to Brydon. It was a picture of the old home in Virginia.

For a long time Brydon held it in his hand, then slowly laid it on the table.

"That kind of a house will hold its own anywhere," he said soberly. "But I can't imagine why you want to leave the city."

He walked over to the mantel, struck a match and lighted a fresh cigar, and Portia, looking at him, saw something in his face that caused her own to flush warmly. For a moment she felt foolishly weak, then a rush of gladness made her heart beat quickly. She dearly loved him, and for many years had felt toward him as an older sister to a younger brother, and yet not until this moment had she realized he was in love—with Joyce.

He did not know what his face was telling as he watched the bent heads of the group around the table, but she understood that he rather resented another home-making for her which was not of his own planning. She wondered if she alone had been blind, or if he had never quite realized it until he felt she was becoming

absorbed in plans which did not include him. Did Joyce herself know? If so, she had concealed her knowledge well, for their comradeship had been always of the frankest and most wholesome kind, and never had there been, apparently, anything but the most commonplace friendship between them. She looked at Joyce, and then again at Brydon, and he, glancing up, saw what was written in her eyes, and this time it was over him the hot blood ran quickly. He threw his cigar in the fire and sat down close by her.

The little group at the table did not notice them, nor could they hear their words.

"You are not the only one who wants a real home, Portia," he said almost under his breath, and for the first time she heard a touch of bitterness in his voice.

"And have you just found out you want one?" she asked.

"I think I have just found out I am going to have one if she will make it for me," he answered, and there was a determined ring to his words that pleased her mightily. "She would not do so now even should this plan of yours fail to materialize," he continued; "but some day she will consent, and to win in the end I am willing to wait. It is going to mean a fight, however." He stopped abruptly and broke into bits a piece of coal, which blazed up brightly.

"You mean your mother?" and in spite of herself Portia's voice grew suddenly chill.

He nodded, then put the poker aside with an impatient gesture.

“My mother has ambitions,” and he laughed harshly. “I have seen a number of money marriages in my life. My own home hasn’t been a bad example of one, and the flavor isn’t to my taste. I’m old-fashioned enough to believe in love, notwithstanding I’m considered young yet for so doing. But if I can’t marry the woman I love, I guess I can do the little journey alone.”

“And you think she would object to your marriage with Joyce?”

Brydon shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

“I think she would much more cheerfully see me buried. She has other plans for me. I shall be sorry to disappoint her, but were she ten times my mother she could not keep me from marrying Joyce if Joyce will marry me. I have never asked her”—his voice quivered slightly. “She is in your care, Portia. Have I your permission to ask her to be my wife?” and he held out his hand to her.

She put her own in his, and for a moment neither spoke.

“When you win her for your wife,” she said presently, and her eyes were bright with tears, “you must wed her from her home—her new home, which for a little while, at least, we are going to call—Spinstervilla.”

CHAPTER VI

The night was a restless one for Portia, and late into it she lay with open eyes and questioning heart, and persistent thoughts of the future.

Surprises, like misfortunes, rarely come singly, and her discovery concerning Brydon's love for Joyce, for the time, at least, quite overshadowed her own good fortune and filled her with perplexing doubts concerning its possible outcome. Matters of love had by no means been an unknown quantity in the busy life of their little household; but as the girls had apparently never taken them seriously, she had put aside the thought of their marriage, and had hoped, from time to time, that for a little while longer they would be content to live together.

Elizabeth was not popular with men in general. Her careless indifference to them often made Portia wonder if in her life there was not some chapter she kept ever closed; but if this were so it was not for her to ask. She only knew that if she had learned the meaning of love she would drink deep of her knowledge, and she and Love would go hand in hand

through life—the rest of the world might go where it chose, she and Love would be enough.

If in Virginia's heart there was a single depth that had not been bared to Portia's loving sight, neither of them were conscious of it. From her school-girl days her love affairs had been frequent, but they had made no greater impress on her than they would have done on the heart of a child, and only once had Portia seen her perplexed or even hesitating. Through friendly affection for a Virginia cousin, a young lieutenant in the Army, she had for a moment wavered concerning the answer she had given, and Portia saw then that her heart was still asleep; but knew that when love should waken it, the whole wide world, if weighed, would be found wanting, and the ends of the earth would be her home if love but led her there.

With Joyce it was different. A born coquette, her experiences weighed lightly on her heart and conscience; for if men would make love, she was wont to declare, it was not a womanly thing to stop them before they started, or imagine they were going to do it before they began. And it was thus she would silence Elizabeth when the latter made remarks in general upon flirts in particular.

All this and more ran persistently through Portia's mind as she lay awake through the hours of the night and tried to adjust some of the possibilities of the future; but stronger than

its fear was her confidence that Brydon was the man of all others for Joyce, and Joyce the woman of all the world for him.

Her love for both was deep and strong, and for Brydon especially she kept ever a warm and tender corner of her heart. As a boy when home from college for the holidays, during her first visit to his mother, he had proceeded most promptly to fall in love with her, and though he had long outgrown this phase of his infatuation, he had given her ever since the loyal and devoted affection of a younger brother, and to Virginia had ever been as an older and equally loving one. He had been abroad at the time of her father's death, and though he had written her frequently afterwards she had not answered his letters, and during her first three years in his own city she had kept from him all knowledge of her whereabouts, knowing full well that his mother would not welcome for him the news of her being so near, nor wish him to keep up his old friendship and affection for her.

That this same mother would bitterly resent his marriage with Joyce, she well knew also. A girl who worked for her living, and whose name was an unknown one in the world of wealth and fashion, would find no welcome in her home; and that Joyce, even if she loved Brydon, would make no advance to his mother, was as certain as that his mother would never make one to her. Meekness was no part of Joyce's nature, while independence was strik-

ingly so, and that Brydon had chosen a path which, in the distance, did not look rose-strewn, seemed an inevitable conclusion from the incompatibility of two, at least, of the parties concerned.

The days, weeks, and months went by, and the hope of a home was fast being materialized in the stately looking house which seemed to have sprung up suddenly on Portia's piece of property overlooking the river. Its unusual style and structure had already begun to attract attention from adjoining property owners and from casual passers-by as well, and the intoxication of home-making was filling its future occupants with thrills of delicious anticipation and delight.

Late in the winter Portia had made a hurried visit to her aunt in Virginia, and the few pieces of furniture, with the plate and portraits that had been saved from the fire which had destroyed her home so many years ago, were sent up to the city to be put in proper condition for use in the new home. That a compelling sense of duty made Portia undertake this little journey, Virginia well knew, for though she had made frequent visits to her relatives in the South, Portia had never once been back to the scene of her old life, and that it cost her a struggle to do so now she understood very well.

In the spring the house was promised, and as the days went by an ever-increasing restless-

ness grew upon each to have all its furnishings ready, and long before the time when they could hope to enter it, every detail had been attended to as far as possible.

Several trips had been made during the progress of its construction, and with each the enthusiasm grew stronger, for Laurie had done his best and the success of his work was assured before it was finished. Even Brydon had yielded to the wisdom of Portia's plan, and as he had sold a part of her property at a fancy price, he was compelled to admit that her decision had been wiser than his own. His interest in the new home was little less than hers after it had fully been decided upon, and after all the details of business had been settled, and when he came up one night and said he was compelled to leave in a day or two for London, his annoyance at having to go was only partially concealed.

"Mother cables me she is ill and asks me to come at once," he told Portia privately, "and of course I must go. If I thought mother was really ill, I should be miserable, naturally, and wouldn't hesitate for a moment, but I don't believe she is. We had a devil of a row before she left. She wanted me to spend the winter in France with her and I declined. I think she understood why and it made her unbecomingly angry. Mother can't understand that I am no longer a child and that I prefer to manage my own time and affairs.

"I have been expecting something like this," he continued after a moment. "It's a way she has. I don't believe she is ill, and yet I dare not take the risk. She may be, and I'd never forgive myself if anything should happen."

"Of course you will have to go," Portia answered regretfully. "Have you any idea when you will be back?"

"By return boat if possible. However, that will not be possible; but not a day longer than necessary will I stay. I know perfectly well why she wants to keep me away from New York, and I guess I shall have to make her understand again that I am my father's son as well as hers," and he looked at Portia significantly.

"Laurie says the house will be almost finished about the last of March," she said presently, "and he wants us to go out with him on the 28th or 30th to inspect it thoroughly. We will have a tally-ho drive, and dinner at the Inn, and it will be such a disappointment if you are not with us."

"I shall be with you if it is possible to get here," he said quietly. "And unless mother is really ill, I think it is going to be possible."

CHAPTER VII

March had behaved beautifully, even for New York, and the first faint suggestions of the coming of spring were elusively evident in the warmth of the wind and the breath of a faint and delicate fragrance in the air.

The relaxing of all nature as it stretched and shook itself and loosened its hardened hold upon old mother-earth was felt rather than seen, and that her mysteries were about to be revealed and her secrets disclosed was joyously evident to the penetrant soul who recognized her subtleties and loved her processes. The wonder of a new birth was in the air, and life was stirring in obedience to the law of its maker, and already one could feel the beginning of its manifestations, although as yet its visible form had not assumed its recurring shape or color.

Joyce sat alone on the back seat of the tallyho. Portia and Irving, Herr Runkel and Virginia were in front of her, while Elizabeth, sitting with Laurie, held the reins of the four horses as the latter leaned over and gave some final directions to the man below.

"Are we ready?" he asked, turning with whip in hand to see if all were comfortably seated. "Hello, Joyce, there goes your hat! Hold on and I'll get it."

The others turned quickly, but already Joyce was scrambling over the side of the coach, and before Laurie could get down she was on the ground and dusting the innocent cause of her descent with unnecessary energy.

"The express is coming," she called to him. "Drive off a little and I will come over in a minute. I've torn my dress and must pin it up."

Laurie looked down the road.

"That is the express, and it sounds like it's slowing up." He drew up the reins quickly and drove across the road to a bend which hid the oncoming train from the horses' sight.

"I wonder why Joyce doesn't come," said Virginia, craning her neck in the direction of the station. "It can't take her all this time to pin her skirt. I believe that train is going to stop."

"It's slowing up," said Irving. "No—there she goes! Great Grandmother, but she's a hummer!" and he stood up and waved to the flying monster as it flashed like lightning down the track.

The train had slackened its marvelous speed, and as it neared the station where Joyce, leaning carelessly against a post, stood waiting, a man swung himself off the platform of the first

coach and came toward her. She held out her hand, and then looked at her watch.

"Only twenty minutes late, after all," she said, trying to speak naturally. "I thought it a pity for you to miss us, so I've torn my dress and ruined my hat to give you a greeting. The others are waiting around the bend. No, here they are now," and she waved her handkerchief slightly as Laurie drove in sight.

Brydon took off his hat and waved it vigorously, while Virginia jumped to her feet with a cry of delight, and seeing his outstretched arms sprang into them and kissed him warmly as he put her down.

Irving and Herr Runkel reached forward to help him up, but already he was at Portia's side, and stooping over he kissed her, then shook hands with Elizabeth, and turned to first one and then the other of the men.

"Brydon ought to go on the stage," said Laurie, still shaking his hand energetically. "He's nothing if not theatrical. He's kept us watching for his ship for twenty-four hours, and, when finally we give him up, he springs upon the scene in the most unexpected manner."

"Nothing like having friends on the directorate," commented Irving, helping Virginia back to her seat, while Joyce took the one she had before. "My grandmother's ghost might have demanded my presence without avail if I had been on that express. How did you manage to get them to slow down, Brydon?"

“Phoned the president for an order,” laughed the latter. “Told him it was a matter of life to get here.” He took out his watch and set it by the clock at the station. “Only got away from the dock forty minutes ago,” he continued. “Mother came over with me. I sent her up to the house with her maid and rushed for the train ahead of the express, but missed it.”

He flashed a queer little grimace at Portia, which no one else noticed, and then he sat down by Joyce, and pushing his hat back wiped his forehead and looked at her as he had not let himself do before. She looked away and called to Laurie to start. The horses, impatient over their long delay, needed but his touch to be off, and in a moment the station was out of sight and the drive to the new home up on the hill begun.

“You expected me?” queried Brydon, turning to Joyce. “Did you make them wait long?”

“I made them wait for the express,” and she smiled as she answered the question. “I knew it was the last chance and I risked my hat on it.” She straightened the latter and gave it a little shake before pinning it more firmly to her soft, loose hair; then she looked at him provokingly.

“You risked your hat? What did your hat have to do with the express, or me? I’d like to preserve it for the rest of my life if it has served me so well, but I’m stupid enough not to understand.”

“No, I guess not—you’re a man. I couldn’t keep them waiting indefinitely, however, and when at last I heard the express coming I dropped my hat and got down for it; tore my dress, broke my finger, I believe, and altogether risked my life, and all for politeness. I’m old-fashioned enough to imagine it’s nice to have some one to meet you and I thought perhaps you might like it.”

“Like it!” and Brydon’s voice quivered in spite of his effort to control it. “I have dreamed of it each hour and minute since I left you. Do you think—”

“Listen!” she cried suddenly, and put out her hand to stop him. “Listen—it’s the Bob White calling. Do you hear it, Virginia? It’s the Bob White calling for its mate.”

The horses slackened their pace, and all grew silent as they heard the call of the partridge and the wood thrush in the distance and the chirp and twitter of the young birds nearer by, and as they listened they almost held their breath.

Very gradually they were reaching the top of the wide plateau, and already they could see the sweep of the river through the trees and feel its salt breath on their faces, while here and there at long distances apart stately houses rose in the center of yet more stately grounds, and art and nature seemed for once to dwell in harmony together.

The spell of the scene was upon all, and in silence they drove a little farther, and then Vir-

ginia stood up and opened her arms impulsively.

"There it is!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Laurie, you have made the old home over again—if only father were here!" Her voice broke, and turning she held her hands out to him, and he, giving the reins to Elizabeth, shook them heartily.

"If you are pleased, I am more than happy," he said lightly, though his face flushed with pleasure. "When the grounds are in good condition and the flowers in bloom there will be no prettier place in the neighborhood," he continued, turning to Portia; "and if you will enjoy living in it as much as I have enjoyed helping to get it together, you will be a happy—"

"Lot of old maids," interrupted Joyce. "Is this where we get down?"

It was the first visit to the new home for weeks, and the progress had been so great since they had last seen it that the surprise and delight of its future occupants was too great for words, and in a sort of ecstatic silence every spot had to be explored and every detail explained.

When finally Portia and Irving were deep in the mysteries of innumerable wires which later were to bring forth light and heat and sound, and Laurie was showing his last surprise to Elizabeth in a reproduction of one of her own mantel designs, and Herr Runkel and Virginia in the music-room were trying to decide just

where the piano should be placed, Brydon could stand it no longer, and Joyce was implored to come out and view the river from a certain spot known only to himself.

Slowly they walked across the brown, moist earth to a clump of splendid trees whose gaunt arms stretched weirdly out against the soft haze of the dying sun, and down the hill until they reached a little hollow where a stream, not long since wakened from its frozen sleep, was gurgling and splashing over its pebbly bed, and here it was that Brydon stopped.

“And my answer, Joyce? You were to give it when I came back, and I cannot wait another moment for it.”

He took her hands in his and compelled her to look into his face.

“What is it, Joyce?”

She tried to draw her hands away.

“I do not know,” she answered slowly. “You have come back, and I have no answer for you. Why did you ever ask me? You know it is impossible, impossible—and the old days were so happy!”

“But the new days will be happier!” he interrupted joyously. “You splendid, cruel thing!” and he took her in his arms and stopped the words upon her lips. “You will not tell me, but I have found it out, and nothing is impossible—nothing!”

She struggled to free herself from his arms.

“But I have not said I loved you. I do not

love you. I mean I will not love you—that is—I will not marry you.”

The foolishness of her words stopped her, and with a sob that was half a laugh she tried again to draw herself away.

Brydon's face grew suddenly grave and white.

“We must not begin with any nonsense, Joyce,” he said soberly. “If you love me enough to marry me, nothing else is to be considered. Is there love enough for that, Joyce?”

She put out her hands protestingly.

“Love is enough for to-day,” and the little catch in her voice was dangerously sweet. “Marriage belongs to to-morrow—and to-morrow may never come. Is it not enough that I love you, Brydon?” and the shyness in her eyes was as wine in his blood—and the woods seemed full of the singing of birds!

It was Laurie's call, clear and loud, that brought them at last to the group waiting at the house, and had they not been so impatient they would have been more penetrating; but as it was, only Portia was conscious that their absence was significant and its length unusual.

“You two people will leave nothing to be learned later,” said Laurie, helping Joyce up the unfinished steps. “You oughtn't to show Joyce every spot on the place at one jump, Brydon. Perhaps she'd rather find them out by degrees. By the way, we've had a big sur-

prise this afternoon," and as Virginia came in sight he looked at Brydon curiously.

The stranger with her saw Brydon first, and then the others heard a cry from each, and to their amazement the two men were for a moment in each other's arms and hugging one another in sheer excess of joy and surprise.

At a greeting so unusual among men the others walked away, and at the sound Brydon turned to Portia.

"Jonathan has come home," he said simply, and the ring in his voice was good to hear. "You have met her, John, I see. You have met them all but Miss Symington. May I present Mr. Livingston, Joyce?"

"I had begun to doubt your being genuine flesh and blood, Mr. Livingston, and had rather placed you among my myths, but I am very glad to welcome you back to America," and she shook hands with him in her cordial Southern way, that sent a glow to his heart at once.

"It's almost worth staying away for years to get such a splendid surprise and greeting as I have had to-day," he answered, placing his hand affectionately on Brydon's shoulder as he spoke, "and I am very grateful for it. I decided very hurriedly to come over, and just got here yesterday. I went to your office at once, Bry, and heard you were expected to-day. I understood from your last letter that you would be back by the twentieth, and a silver sixpence was never flatter than I when I learned

you were still out of town. I was coming down to-night, however, to hunt you up; but I'm awfully glad to see you now, old fellow," and again they were shaking hands.

The others laughed and began to move toward the tally-ho.

"But how did you drop in here?" asked Brydon. "Of all places on earth it was the last in which to expect you."

"But I'm always found in unexpected places—though it really does look odd my being here, doesn't it? I bought Hampstead, you know, from Bryce a short time ago, and as I had never seen it I thought I'd run out and take a look. And this afternoon, as I was passing, my curiosity brought me in here, not thinking, of course, that any one was about. I saw Laurie at once, and he presented me to the others and began to hunt for you."

"You've bought Hampstead?" said Brydon incredulously. "You've bought Hampstead and had never seen it until yesterday? Are you never going to stop that sort of thing, John? Was Bryce in trouble again?"

Livingston nodded and laughed carelessly.

"Matters were a little tight with Bryce, and besides I needed a corner to come back to. The house in New York has been sold, and a fellow wants some sort of a place for his things, you know. By the way, is Miss Deming the cousin about whom you have written to me so often?"

"I have written to you about both of them,"

Brydon answered ambiguously. "They are my first cousins, and cousins of Irving's also, though on the other side."

"And is Miss Symington a cousin also?"

The look on Brydon's face made an answer unnecessary, and Livingston shook his hand until it hurt.

"Pardon, old man," he said quickly. "I'm coming in to-night and I hope you've got something to tell me," and before Brydon could stop him he had swung himself up on his horse and was waving good-by as he rode rapidly down the drive which led to the road below.

At dinner that night Mr. Livingston's sudden appearance among them overshadowed the comments and criticisms of the house, and over their coffee Brydon told them the story of his life.

They had long known of him as Brydon's best-loved friend, but now that he was back, and by a strange coincidence would have a home near theirs, the latter knew it was time that he should tell them something more.

"We have been friends almost since babyhood," he began, "and though John is older than I and graduated ahead of me, he came back for law and finished the same year I got my degree. Later, when I was working for law, he went in for medicine, just to see what was in it, he said; and not until long afterwards did I understand and appreciate why he did it.

"I wasn't looking at life very seriously just

at that time, and had it not been for John I might have gone to the Devil. He didn't like the path, however, and he managed to keep me out of it somehow. Had he taken it I should have followed him blindly, and so would several others, for he had more power than any man in school; but fortunately his taste didn't lie that way.

"When the grind was over for both of us we started off on a trip, and had been gone about a year when he was called home by the death of his father. I came over with him, of course, and it was well I did, for two months later his mother died, and in all my life I've never seen a fellow so cut to pieces as John was by his mother's death. His love for her, and hers for him, wasn't an every-day sort, or rather it was different from the every-day sort I ran against, and her death pretty nearly knocked him off his feet. He knew there was much to be done, however, and went to work on his father's estate, and discovered to his misfortune that he was a far richer man than he had dreamed. His father had been a quiet, studious, and yet strictly business old gentleman, and John had no idea of what he was really worth until he died.

"It would have been better for some reasons had he been left without a penny, for he needed to dig deep and hard to keep from thinking; but as it was he found himself at twenty-four with several millions to his credit and no one

to share it with—no sisters or brothers, and no home to keep up, for nothing could induce him to enter his house after his mother's body had been taken out. There had been other children, but all had died in babyhood, and John was left practically alone after the death of his parents. An aunt of his attended to his things, I believe, and had what she thought best stored away. The house was rented and Jack went into apartments.

“A few months later, mother was ordered abroad by her doctor, and I was compelled to take her over and see her comfortably fixed for the winter. The night I got back John came around and told me he was to be married the next week. Up to that time we had never had more than a boyish quarrel, but that night we nearly came to blows. I knew so well his reckless, generous nature that I was perfectly certain he would do some fool thing with his money if it ever presented itself, and while I was away it had been presented and he had taken it in without a thought or a care for the consequences.”

Brydon leaned back and ran his hand across his forehead as if the memory of that night was still a painful one, and then he continued:

“The woman he was to marry was one of the best known and most beautiful in New York, but as soulless as a paper doll. She had lost her father about the same time John had lost his, and as the former's estate was terribly in-

volved, she would have had to change her mode of life unless she married, and as John was the highest card in her hand at that particular time she played him for all he was worth—and won the game, of course.

“She was older than John—several years older, and she as deliberately worked upon his sympathies and appealed to his generosity as priest ever worked for proselyte; and John, utterly indifferent to his own happiness, had swallowed her bait and offered her his name and his money, and she had accepted both so readily that when I returned the day for the wedding had been appointed, and nothing I could say would induce him to postpone it.

“He didn’t pretend to love her. As far as I know he has never loved any woman; but he felt sorry for her, and if his money could make her happier—why it might as well do it, he said.

“I made some nasty remarks to John that night, and he came near knocking me down for them. I deserved it, but I was simply crazy to think of his selling himself in that way, and I told him some cold truths about the woman he was to marry. It was then that we almost came to blows.

“I apologized, however, and after a while we cooled down and talked it over more quietly. His utter indifference in the whole matter hurt me more than if he had been in love with her, for until he found her out he might have been

happy; but, except that he was necessary to make the marriage go off, he was perfectly indifferent to it.

“Of course he did not say he did not love her, but neither did he say he did, and I knew in the beginning how it was going to end.”

Brydon took out a cigar and looked at it, then smiled slightly.

“It was the funniest marriage I ever saw, and the saddest, as paradoxical as it may sound,” he continued after a minute. “There was no discount on Miss Grey’s beauty—she looked superb; but there were flashes of indignation sent off continually during the service by John’s part of the gathering, and his aunt was literally in tears.

“I swore at first I wouldn’t go, and then my heart failed me. I loved him better than anything on earth—and I went, of course.

“They went abroad immediately after the wedding, and the mother-in-law went with them. John wrote to me frequently, but he rarely mentioned his wife, and when one day he cabled me he had left for Africa to do some shooting, I knew he had come to the end of the rope so far as patience and endurance was concerned, and that he had quit.

“A few months later I joined him, and one night, sitting out in front of our tents in the heart of the forest, with the stars above us and our guns by our side, he told me that he had left his wife, and why, and when. That was

the first time he had ever mentioned the subject to me, and only occasionally has he done so since.

“Two years and a half later a divorce was gotten, and he wrote me of it, merely stating the fact and not going into details; but to my certain knowledge he has never seen his wife since he left her in Paris, and he never will again if it is possible to avoid it. When he left her he had no intention of getting a divorce. He expected to pay to the full for his bitter mistake, and never once has he blamed her for his folly. He is not a man to excuse himself or to attempt any palliation for his conduct. He had been foolishly careless and indifferent to so serious a question as marriage, and that the world would never hear a comment from him I knew as well as I knew the man.”

Brydon paused a moment and rubbed his forehead slowly with his fingers, then smiled slightly as he began again.

“The ground for divorce was incompatibility I believe. I suppose that was as good a name to call it as any other, but it might have been called anything. I do not want to be unjust, however,” he added grimly. “As cordially as I hate Margaret Grey, I do not want to create a wrong impression. She did not trifle with her husband’s name or honor, but she did everything else that was unendurable and unbearable in a woman, and the wonder was that John did not quit long before he did.”

“The divorce, of course, was gotten over here—in one of the Western States, I believe, and all future dealings with his wife were ended by John’s depositing to her credit a sum sufficient to satisfy even her abnormal appetite in that direction.”

Brydon put the cigar he had been holding between his fingers back into his pocket, and got up and stood with his hands resting a moment on the back of his chair, and when he spoke again his voice was hard and bitter.

“There is a saying in Paris that ‘whatever an American woman undertakes to do she generally succeeds in, and that when she attempts to ruin a man’s life she usually makes a success of it.’ This time, thank God, the saying didn’t come true, for while the shame and misery of all this has made John a stranger in his own land for many years, it hasn’t ruined him and it never will.”

He broke off abruptly and then looked at his watch. “It is time for our train,” he said hurriedly, and as if glad to change the subject. “I have kept you too long already, but as you will hear various versions of all this, now John has come home, I wanted you to know the true one. To judge him by the standards of other men is to misjudge him. He is too independent of public opinion, too impulsive and fearless not to be often misunderstood; but he has learned one lesson well, and it is one he will never forget. He understands now to the full that no

marriage is lawful without love; and that he has paid a bitterer price for his knowledge than most men pay is due to his nature, which scorns above all men I have ever known, those things which are not clean and white and honest and high. Come, it is time for the train."

CHAPTER VIII

Virginia's cup of happiness was not only full, but so full that it constantly threatened to run over. Spinstervilla was not something that was to be—it was, and like a bird that from sheer excess of joy flits restlessly from limb to limb, so she wandered up and down the wide, cool halls and out upon the broad verandas, and into the bed-rooms and library and dining-room and back again into the hall, until Elizabeth suggested that she take a dose of something.

“For what?” she asked. “For happiness? Do you give people things to take for happiness?” and she laughed joyously.

She stood for a moment longer in the doorway, where Elizabeth had stopped her, and looked beyond the broad fields to the silver thread of the river as it flashed and sparkled in the sunlight, then went softly down the steps to a large tree on the lawn that she might better see one of her pretty feathered friends who was calling and chattering to its mate. As she watched the latter fly to his little wife and then fly off again in a most mannerless way, she nodded her head very wisely and began to talk

to the neglected little creature as if it were entirely human and quite equal to understanding all she was about to say.

Virginia's passionate love for all the beautiful things of life, for all the things that God had made, had given her an intuitive comradeship with them, and it was as spirit unto spirit that she breathed in their atmosphere and breathed out a recognition of their mysteries and an understanding of their might, and to her nothing was commonplace, but everything wonderful.

How the birds sing and flowers bloom and grass grows; how the sun shines and waves break and rain falls; how the clouds make glory for the sky, and how the earth brings forth her increase, were all matters of marvel to her, and she worshiped the Creator of it all and wondered at the work of His hands, and her creed was love for both.

That at last she was to live again where she could daily watch the unfolding of bud and blossom and blade; could drink deep draughts of beauty, and could hear the murmur of the brook and the melody of birds, and could listen to the inner voices, meant to stir depths that were almost unknown to herself; and as she stood under the tree on this perfect day in early May a flood of warmth and welcome for the new life surged joyously over her, and her face reflected gloriously the gladness in her heart.

It was a rare face, high-bred and pure, with faith in the eyes, and a laughing mouth. Ex-

quisite womanliness radiated from it, and few who saw it failed ever to forget it.

The way she looked at life, the way she loved it and lived it was reflected in looks and voice and manner, and the splendid health of her body was evidenced by its poise and grace, and fresh vigor and reserve of power.

That life was a real, an earnest, and happy thing she would have admitted gladly and with scant patience with those who did nothing for it and got nothing from it, and through her many experiences in the heart of a great city she had come with her confidence in human nature still unshaken, and with strong faith in the good that is somewhere to be found in all.

She had seen many phases of life; had seen much of sin and suffering and sorrow, but she had refused to believe that all sorrow and suffering is caused by sin, and had known that sin is not seldom caused by suffering and sorrow; and a great pity and tenderness and patient tolerance had gradually grown in her heart for much that she had seen that on its surface had seemed hopeless and impossible at first.

Hers was no sentimental sympathy, and she recognized the law of penalty and the necessity of its enactments; but with a cheerful courage that never failed she persisted in her faith that with half a chance there would be more good than evil in the world, and her trust was in God—and man and woman—to make it so.

She had loved her work in the city; would always love it, and would ever keep in touch with it, but to leave its dust and dirt, its noise and confusion, and its restless, struggling life was to breathe free again, and as she leaned against the tree she suddenly put her arms around it and pressed her face against its cool, rough bark.

Most of all things in nature, she loved trees—they were so human, so like people. Some were strong and restful and full of power; others so frail that they bent to every breeze and shivered when the wind was high, and shrank and shriveled when the sun was hot. And others yet again were stern and silent and solemn and straight, and in their branches the birds would never nest in courting time. They, too, were like some people, but she did not like people of that sort. She smiled whimsically at the thought, and unclasping her arms from the tree, walked away to one whose great limbs promised protection later on from heat and sun; then she stopped again and looked critically around her. In a few weeks the place would be a blaze of beauty and color and perfume, and the success of it all would be largely due to the boys. Her critical look changed to one of interest as she scanned every detail of the house, then she smiled to herself.

“None of my lovers are in it,” she thought, leaning back against the tree and idly clasping her hands behind her head. “Brydon adores

Portia, but Joyce is his mainspring of action. Laurie venerates her, but he loves Elizabeth and is afraid to tell her so. Irving worships her but is wedded to electricity, and if we would let him would put little bells on us all; and even Mr. Livingston, for Brydon's sake, has had something to do with it too."

Her eyes came back from the house and made a wide sweep of the grounds. They had been put in thorough order for future development without their knowledge or consent, but with Brydon's, by the gardener at Hampstead, Mr. Livingston's new home.

The spring had been an unusually mild one and vegetation for the season was remarkably advanced. Already the grass was beginning to send up tiny green blades, and long, slender shoots of the vines around the fencing, which was to form a hedge, were reaching out and twisting themselves sturdily about the wires; and the breath of new life was in all the air.

It was very kind of Mr. Livingston. He had asked permission of Brydon to have this work done, and yet Portia had not liked it. Brydon had said it was nonsense. Jonathan was like his brother, and he simply suggested that his men put the grounds in shape before the house was occupied, and he had agreed, thinking Portia would be pleased:

The gardens at Hampstead were the most famous in the neighborhood, and to have the head gardener, an old Scotchman who knew his

business thoroughly, start things at Spinstervilla was a piece of rare luck, and Portia ought to see it in that light—but Portia didn't.

Pleasants was to take charge of the grounds hereafter, with the occasional assistance of a man from the village; but that he could not have gotten them in their present condition Virginia understood very well, and, like Brydon, she wondered why Portia had seemed to regret that the gardener from Hampstead had done the preliminary work, but regret it she certainly did.

Pleasants was a Virginia importation, who, with Martha, his wife, was to represent the retinue of servants at Spinstervilla, and since their arrival they had been a source of unfailing delight to their future mistresses. They both belonged to that class of family servants which in the old life had made the problem of domestic service a much less serious one than it now is, and on her visit to Virginia, Portia had arranged for them to live with her when the new home was finished, and no two babes in the woods ever started off more innocently than these two buxom, middle-aged darkies on this their first trip to a city of any size.

For the past two days Pleasants's face had been one vast expansive grin, owing to the receipt of a box of cast-off clothing which Brydon had sent out to him. Martha's pride in the same was as great as his own, and the night before Virginia and Joyce had hugely en-

joyed a conversation unintentionally overheard between them.

The clothing was evidently being taken out piece by piece, and Pleasants's exclamations were original if not elegant.

"Hi, w'at's this?" they heard him say. "Fo' Gord, if it ain't a swallowtail! Now won't I be a reg'lar buck in that?" and he held it off at arm's length so that Martha's admiring gaze could rest more readily upon it. "A swallowtail, all for myse'f, an' the pants an' westcutt to match! Now wouldn't Miss Portia's father like to know I was flyin' round her with coat-tails on like these? Now wouldn't he?" and Pleasants, with a grunt, made another dive into the box and brought up a coat of another shape, and another low-cut vest, which seemed to puzzle him.

"These heah two things fit," he said presently, trying them on—"this heah coat an' westcutt, but they show all my shirt bosom same as the swallow-tail suit do. I reckon now this heah's meant for somethin' extry, but I don't get on to w'at it jes' do mean," and Pleasants looked at Martha questioningly.

"I knows w'at they is," she said after a minute, critically examining the lining, pockets, and length of the sleeves. "It's w'at Jim Roberts say they call some kind of a tuck-into coat, w'at you put on when there ain't no special company, but when you jes' want to show you got a clean shirt an' ain't coverin' up a dirty

one with a long cravat. Jim say the summer waiters wears 'em all the time at the Springs. I reckon Miss Portia will want you to wear these every night an' keep the swaller-tails for specials. Lord knows I certainly is glad it's you w'at's got to do the waitin' on an' me the cookin'. I know I kin cook if I ain't bothered, an' got things to cook wid, but 'twould make me turn round like a top to put me in the dinin'-room wid the white folks all the time!"

Pleasants grunted again. It was evident he liked the prospect.

Two more suits were fished out of the box, and shirts, collars, cuffs, cravats, etc., were spread around the room. When finally he had exhausted his vocabulary of adjectives he took out his pipe, lighted it, and leaned back in his chair for a smoke to quiet his nerves.

"W'at's the name of this heah gent'man w'at's give me these things?" he asked after a silent puff or two—waving his hand in the direction of his newly-acquired garments. "W'at did they say his name was, Marthy?" and he held his pipe in his hand as he asked the question.

"His name is Mr. Brydon Field," she answered slowly, folding up some of the things and putting them back in the box. "He's Miss Portia's an' Miss Virginia's cousin, they say, an' jes' like their own brother—but they can't fool me like that. I bet he's lovin' some of these young ladies. 'Tain't natural that a man

could mix with 'em an' not fall in love with some of 'em. 'Tain't natural, that it ain't," and Martha's voice was decidedly derisive at the mere idea.

"He's a Yankee gent'man an' maybe they don't fall in love so quick as our young gent'men," suggested Pleasants. "He seemed to be very natchral and easy with 'em all the night we saw 'em in the city, an' I didn't see no partic'lar int'rest in nary one of 'em."

"You didn't!" returned Martha scornfully, her head still bent over the box. "You didn't! Well, you're a man an' 'twasn't to be espected that you would; but you jes' wait awhile, an' I bet even you'll see that he ain't jes' a cousin to 'em all. Men ain't made that way. He cert'n'y is a nice man—but he's a man," and again Martha gave a grunt more expressive than further comments, and dived for another batch of collars and cuffs to put carefully away.

"This heah cert'n'y is a beautiful place w'at they got heah," Pleasants commented after a pause. "I thought Miss Portia was po'. They tell me down in the county that there warn't no money left after the old gent'man died, an' that Miss Portia an' Miss Virginia been a earnin' their own money ever since they went away; but dis heah am a rich person's home, an' Gord knows I'm glad of it. To think of old Marse Deming's daughters bein' po' is too scan'lous to believe, that 'tis—an' them what's

been born into what they was can't no way 'commodate themselves to po' folks' ways. 'Tain't to be expected of 'em either," and Pleasants, puffing vigorously at his pipe, filled the room with its smoke as he leaned back in restful relaxation in his chair.

"You're right it ain't," agreed Martha, wiping the perspiration from her face. "You couldn't make po' folks of a Deming, no matter what you'd do to 'em. They is born quality, an' it's like the color of their eyes and the shape of their feet—it's in 'em. I don't know nothin' about these other young ladies, 'cept I know they is ladies by their ways and their looks, an' because Miss Portia wouldn't have 'em if they warn't—but I do know about Miss Portia an' Miss Virginia. My mother an' my grandmother, an' her mother before her, I reckon, all belonged to the Deming family, and everybody what is anybody knows what the Demings been used to all their lives till the trouble come after Miss Portia's father died.

"They tell me in the county too that they is po'," she continued presently; "but Miss Portia tole me 'bout the lady leavin' her some money an' some land, an' that's how come it they built this house. Gord knows I'd like to thank that lady," and Martha began to make her preparations for closing up for the night.

She went out in the kitchen for a moment, then came back and shut the door.

"I done put out the lights," she said grumbly, "an' it's a mighty easy way they have

up heah to put 'em out—jes' turn a screw, an' pooh! they're gone; but I believe there's some trick about it, that I do. 'Tain't right an' lawful to have things done so easy, an' I reckon we'll all be blowed up some night. All them w'at likes 'em can have these 'lectric things to come and go like witches, but I wisht I had my old kerosene lamp this minute, that I do," and Martha bolted her door with unusual energy, as if locks and bars were proof against modern conveniences which somehow or other were stubbornly connected in her mind with contrivances of the Devil, and which sooner or later would assert themselves in a way destructive to the peace and repose of the household.

Virginia smiled to herself as she thought over the conversation of the night before, and she wondered how long it would be before Martha's sharp eyes would discover that Brydon's cousinship did not include every member of their little family, and while still wondering she heard Joyce calling her from the front steps on which she was standing, and with an answering call she walked toward her and went into the house.

CHAPTER IX

There was nothing else to be done, and Portia and Elizabeth, content to be quiet for a few moments before the arrival of their guests, came out on the front veranda and lay back in the comfortable depths of their low, easy chairs, in unspeakable thankfulness that the final touch had been given and the time for rest and relaxation had come at last. For a week past unceasing labor and care had been spent in the making of a home out of their house, and as Portia had forbidden any visits during the process of furnishing, the arrival to-night of Brydon and Laurie, of Irving and Mr. Livingston, to break bread with them for the first time in their new quarters, was causing a delightful little thrill of pride and pleasure in the heart of each.

Herr Runkel could not be with them. He had been suddenly called to Germany, and though he had wept at leaving before the house was finished and his "deer, deer friens" safely established in it, Brydon was immensely rejoiced at his absence and had begged that Mr. Livingston should be allowed to come in his place. Quite frequently since

the latter's return to New York had he dropped in with Brydon for a cup of tea in Portia's sitting-room in the city, and as a future neighbor he had been quietly unobtrusive in many acts of thoughtfulness at Spinstervilla; nevertheless, try to stifle it as she would, Portia continually found herself filled with a wilfully unreasoning desire that he would go away again—go away before they should learn to miss him or to feel the influence of his presence. With that intuition so unerringly developed in some women, she realized at once that he was too strongly possessed of power—that supreme requisite in a man—to be an ordinary friend who would come and go indifferently at will, and already she had seen that he cared too little for people in general not to be capable of caring very much for some in particular. Whether the members of her little household would come under the one head or the other had been a question that would persistently arise in her mind and mock her with an answer for which there was no foundation save the instinct of her woman's heart.

That the doors of exclusive society and excessive wealth had been opened wide to welcome him back to his old home, and that he had been smothered in invitations to all sorts and sizes of functions from old friends and new, she well understood; but in her old-fashioned balance the weight of her desire that he had never come amongst them made all else want-

ing, and a little cloud no bigger than a woman's fear shaped itself on the horizon of her heart and would not melt away.

However, for Brydon's sake she would be friendly, and she had done as he had asked. And now as she sat upon the veranda awaiting their arrival, she tried to put from her all possibilities that were not pleasant, and to hope that the happy beginning of the new life would be but a promise of the days that were to come.

Joyce and Virginia had left her to make a final survey of the house, and as they stood in front of the dining-room door looking within, the joy of their new possessions was flushing their faces with a light that is made by content when it passes into satisfaction.

"This room is the pride of Elizabeth's heart," said Virginia, glancing around it lovingly and noticing critically its every detail. "If the body is to be as well nourished in it as the soul is satisfied by it, we will be a happy lot of old maids after all."

She slipped inside and straightened one of the tall, old-fashioned silver candelabra on the table, then stood back to notice the effect.

"Elizabeth's taste for old-fashioned furnishings should surely be gratified at last," she continued, laughing slightly. "I admit I am enough of a barbarian to enjoy new things, still I think she's right about this room. There isn't a discord in it, she says, and I hope there will be none from it; but Martha would undo the reso-

lution of the Pope, and I'm not at all certain about our internal harmony until we learn not to take advantage of the change that has come to us."

Joyce laughed and came inside to change the position of an olive dish on the table.

"I agree with Elizabeth about this room," she said presently. "It's like some people—it has got an air about it."

They stood a moment looking around, and the sun, just sinking in the west, threw a gleam of light through the sheer net curtains upon the opposite wall and lost itself in the pattern of the rug upon the floor. The room was a large and bright one, and its furnishings were as old wine, rich and mellow. The deep cream tint of the walls drew out in full contrast the warm glow of the handsome old mahogany furniture, the furniture which had once been used in the old Virginian home so many years ago, and with the white wood-work and odd-shaped windows reproduced almost exactly the room in which it had so long been in use.

On the sideboard was the family plate, and in the two quaint diamond-paned presses were rare bits of china and glass which to Portia, at least, were priceless indeed. In the centre of the table, at which plates were laid for eight, a deep, old-fashioned cut-glass bowl was filled with lilacs, white and lavender and purplish pink; and at either end silver candelabra of colonial pattern held white candles, which were

as yet unlighted. There was no cloth upon the table, but through the hand-made mats of thread the polished mahogany gleamed rich and red, and as Virginia and Joyce looked at it, set as was always the custom in their dear old Southern homes, they smiled almost through tears, and turned quickly away lest their happiness should make them do something silly and the joy of the present be shadowed by the pain of the past.

“After years of boarding-house service it seems impossible to have a table like that for one’s very own, doesn’t it?” said Virginia a little tremulously, turning away from the room as she spoke. “I’m almost afraid to go to sleep at night for fear I’ll wake up and find it all a dream.”

She stopped in front of an old portrait and tilted it a little more to one side, then stepped back to see if it was right, and as she did so the look on Joyce’s face made her burst out laughing.

“If the dining-room is after Elizabeth’s heart, this hall is certainly after Portia’s.” She rested one arm lightly around Joyce’s neck and surveyed rather doubtfully the array of old portraits on the walls. “I’m afraid worship of my ancestors isn’t one of my fads, but I wouldn’t tell Portia so for something pretty. She believes in preserving the pictures of the dear departed, but if that old gentleman were entirely mine I think I’d burn him up.”

“Is that his wife?” asked Joyce, pointing to a stern-faced matron with her hands rigidly clasped together.

“I believe so, but I’m not at all certain as to which belongs to which. I remember that one, however,” and she pointed to the portrait of a very beautiful woman in court dress. “She was my great, great, great-grandmother I believe, and she’s got on the dress she wore when she was presented at the court of Somebody when my great, great, great-grandfather was Minister to Somewhere. I won’t swear to the accuracy of that, however,” and she laughed carelessly. “Portia is the authority on family history—not I.”

They moved slowly on to the end of the hall and stopped for a moment to look down its length before they turned to retrace their steps, and as they looked a sigh of satisfaction escaped from both.

The hall was an unusual one in size and shape. Crossing the house in the centre at right angles it gave a sense of spaciousness and coolness that was more than grateful after years spent in the contracted quarters of a city apartment, and that its furnishing had been a matter of careful attention was evident at a glance.

On the polished floor were scattered here and there a few handsome oriental rugs. At one end an old-fashioned fireplace threw out a glint of light from the logs burning cheerily on a

pair of andirons Elizabeth had imported from her Georgia home, and nearby a claw-foot sofa of capacious size suggested days that were long since dead.

On the landing half way up the steps a veritable grandfather's clock, which had been Joyce's gift to Portia, sedately ticked the hours away as if aware that it was once more in an atmosphere of appreciation and respect, while in the centre of the hall, where the angle crossed, a heavy round mahogany table, with a lamp on it, was filled with books and magazines piled carelessly together. Here and there were graceful palms and bowls and jars of roses, and in the deep window-seats cushions of all sorts were temptingly inviting in their soft and dainty depths.

Joyce walked slowly back to the table and turned on the light, and the mellow glow from the lamp sent a warm thrill across the books and stretched faintly out to the four ends of the hall.

"Antiquities are not my fad, but pressing a button is," she said, straightening a rose which was drooping in the bowl nearby. Unlike Martha, I dearly love to say 'let there be light'—and there is light. Touch that button near you, Virginia, and make this hall a blaze of glory."

A moment only was given to the library, with its cool, green walls, its long, low book shelves, its few fine pictures and deep, easy chairs, and

but a glance at the music-room just across from it; but at Portia's bed-room door they stood for some little while, looking in at the exquisite daintiness and simplicity of its furnishing, and then Virginia stepped over to the dressing-table and opened a miniature case that was lying upon it. She held it up to Joyce, and together they looked at it in silence, then turned quietly and left the room.

The sound of carriage wheels made them quicken their steps, and going out on the veranda they reached it in time to see Mr. Livingston throw the reins to his man and jump from the trap, followed by Brydon, Irving, and Laurie, and the greeting they gave and received was a merry, cordial one.

Irving, however, had hardly shaken hands before he was at the door, and touching something the quaint-looking lanterns hanging from the top of the veranda gave out a clear bright light, then instantly were dark again.

"I just wanted to see if they were working right," he explained. "They are only meant for clouds and company. How's Martha getting on with her 'lectrics,' Portia? May I go and ask her?"

The latter nodded and turned to Mr. Livingston, who was speaking to her.

"It was very good of you to let me come," he was saying, but before she could answer, Brydon had both her hands in his and was shaking them in his old enthusiastic way.

“Of course it was good of her, jolly good,” he interrupted, “though he bolted several other bids to get here. However, we want to see the house, and Virginia says the inspection can begin at once. The itinerary begins with the hall, I believe, and no comments are to be made on the family portraits. March!”

He put Portia’s hand on his arm and pushed Livingston toward Virginia, and laughingly the others fell in line, calling, as they did so, for Irving to join them as they entered the door.

* * * * *

The human heart is very like the human heart, and worn indeed must be the one which does not respond to that which represents the supreme climax of a woman’s work—the making of a home. Very true is it also that places, like people, are the exponents of personality, and so evident was this of Spinstervilla that before the survey of the house was over its influence was upon them all, and the silence of the men meant more than words, for they felt, rather than saw, that rare touch which cannot be bought, but has always to be born; and feeling it they knew not what to call it, and wisely did not try.

Many-sided is a man’s heart and life, and both are touched here by one influence and there by another, but deep down in the centre of one, or on the edge of the other’s circumference, is hidden somewhere a spot that is ever vulnerable, the spot that one day meant, or

some day will mean—home; and the woman knows best how to help God who knows best how to make one for those she loves.

They came out again on the veranda to look at the lights on the river and to watch the night boats as they blinked their way between the shadowy shores, and the silence that had somehow fallen upon them all was broken just in time to save notice by Pleasants's announcement that supper was ready.

Virginia laughed outright as she looked at Joyce.

"You'll never make a success of him from the standpoint of style, Miss Symington!" she exclaimed, turning away from the railing on which she had been leaning and going toward the door. "All day long Joyce has been laboring over Pleasants trying to teach him certain correct formulas, of which 'supper is ready' was not one," she added, looking at the others; "but bless his heart! he's forgotten all about them and said the same thing he has heard all his life at Aunt Ann's in Virginia."

"I'll give him a dollar if he'll keep it up," said Brydon, waiting for Portia to move. "If there is anything on earth that I do like to hear is ready, it's supper. It always reminds me of my first visit to Uncle Carter's when I nightly tried to take my life with his hot temptations. I've never had any supper since my last trip South, and the Southern blood in me cries out for one every now and then, and it's crying loud to-night."

Portia smiled, and turning to Mr. Livingston put her hand within his arm.

"We are without law and order to-night," she said laughing gently, "but perhaps we had better lead the way. Brydon, you take Joyce; Laurie, Elizabeth; and Virginia you come with Irving," and she crossed the hall and entered the dining-room, which up to this time had not been seen by the men.

An exclamation from Brydon and Irving was simultaneous, and the former, dropping Joyce, rushed up to Portia and had his arms around her before she or the rest could understand what was the matter.

"Hot rolls!" they heard him say somewhere behind her neck; "hot rolls and sally-lunn like old Aunt Melindy used to make! Hot rolls and sally-lunn!" and leaving Portia, Brydon made a circuit of the table, shaking hands with each man in turn, and then stopping at his seat he looked at Portia and bent his head quickly.

The latter's face flushed slightly, but with just the least bit of hesitation she bowed hers and said grace, as Brydon remembered her father had always done in the old home years ago.

Such a jolly supper it was! Its informality was infectious, and Pleasants, who had been ordered by Martha to maintain a solemn face and a dignified manner throughout the entire meal, was soon in an excited state of suppressed enthusiasm as he danced around the

table in his efforts to show his familiarity with the art of serving. His face was one great grin of delight, and fairly shone through the perspiration with which it was beaded, and while as a butler he was something of a novelty, he was immensely enjoyed by all.

It was an old-fashioned supper, and Martha's vanity swelled to grunting proportions of self-approbation before it was ended, by Pleasants's repeated visits to the kitchen for fresh relays of coffee and tea, hot rolls in various shapes, and chicken broiled to a degree of brownness that was positive beauty. Salad made by the recipe of an old Southern epicure was pronounced a poem of its kind, and the modern chef declared a failure in his serving of the same; and justice was done in full measure to Martha's specialties as each was served in turn.

"Them there gent'mens is w'at they call city swells, I reckon," said Pleasants, coming into the kitchen and holding out the coffee urn to be refilled; "but they mus' be jes' natchrally starvin'. I ain't never seen gent'mens w'at eats with more relish, an' judgin' by it, I don't reckon they of'en git things fit for w'ite folks, savin' these fancy fixins' 'thout no substance in 'em, an' they're downright hongry at the taste of food. That there gent'man with the glasses on, Mr. Livingston, I believe they call him, say that old country ham is the best thing he ever et in his life, an' I jes' whisper to him, 'it come from old Virginia, where they makes the best

on earth,' and Pleasants, chuckling to himself, trotted out again; and in the kitchen, Martha, listening, heard peal after peal of laughter, and in her heart was certain that Pleasants was responsible for part of it at least.

Very gaily was the ball of conversation being tossed to and fro; and rapidly it flew from one to the other, was caught up, returned, and sent back again, when Brydon caused a sudden silence to fall for a moment over all.

Mr. Livingston wanted a slice of sally-lunn.

"I don't know what you call it, Miss Deming," he said, turning toward Virginia, "but it's dangerously fascinating. May I have another piece?"

Brydon laughed.

"You've been called Miss Deming, Virginia; John don't know yet that doesn't stand for you. Can't he call her Virginia, Portia? To call her Miss would ruin the ring in her name. John's no stranger; he's just been away, that's all."

For a moment there was stillness around the table, and Brydon looking up saw Livingston was glaring at him and that Virginia's face was flushed, and knew that he had made a break. Virginia's tact was ever readiest, and quickly she broke the silence.

"Brydon is right, Mr. Livingston," she said indifferently, turning toward him. "I am never classified formally among my friends, and Miss Deming doesn't belong to me, so perhaps when you mean me you had better say Virginia."

“Do you really mean it?” he asked slowly. “I should be very glad, for it would help to make me forget how much the others have the advantage of me,” and his brow cleared from the frown with which it was drawn by Brydon’s thoughtless words.

“Then the privilege must include me also, Mr. Livingston,” broke in Joyce promptly. “Virginia is only two years younger than I, and if, as a spinster, she can be called Virginia, I can be called Joyce. Elizabeth is Miss Polk to everybody except the few people she likes; and the Mother Superior”—and Joyce kissed her fingers to Portia—“is Miss Deming to every one except to us; but Virginia and I claim the privilege of youth,” and again Joyce refused to notice that Brydon was trying to thank her with his eyes.

“I don’t claim the privilege of youth,” laughed Elizabeth, breaking open a roll and letting the steam escape, “and I admit my title to the class to which I belong, but if you call me Miss Polk, according to Joyce, it will be because I don’t like you. I don’t know whether I like you or not—I haven’t known you long enough to find out, but as the rest call me Elizabeth I guess I will have to risk it with you too,” and she smiled good-naturedly at Mr. Livingston’s still perplexed face.

“You’re both very good—and frightfully honest,” he added, smiling grimly, “but if you ever want to change your mind it will be too late. If it is to be Virginia, Joyce, and Eliza-

beth now, it is to be Virginia, Joyce, and Elizabeth forever," and turning he looked Virginia full in the face as if to give her another chance to settle the matter finally. The latter shot a grateful glance at Joyce, but before she could speak Brydon was blurting out something again.

"And what's the matter with calling Portia, Portia?" he asked as innocently as if unconscious that his first suggestion had been a mistake. "Portia's my older sister and Virginia's my younger one, and John is the nearest thing I ever had to a brother, and I don't see any use in cultivating formalities. By the way, Portia, did you know the old man who fixed your furniture had been paralyzed? Your sideboard over there reminds me of him. The doctor says he is going to make a die of it this time. That's a daisy sideboard, isn't it Laurie?—genuine Chippendale," and Brydon handed his plate to Pleasants for another slice of ham.

The air, which was getting rather heavily charged, cleared instantly at the change in the conversation caused by the news concerning the old cabinet-maker, whom Portia had known for years, and when after awhile, just for a taste of something sweet, Pleasants brought in some brandy peaches and pound cake, Brydon's question had apparently been forgotten.

Only for a short time did the men linger over their cigars, and when finally the dining-room was deserted by them, Portia and Irving were soon back in it and deep in the details of certain

mechanical arrangements which Martha did not understand.

Laurie drew up a chair for Elizabeth near the fireplace, and chunking the logs made them blaze cheerfully up and down the depths of the chimney, and seating himself near her leaned back in quiet content.

Brydon had taken Joyce to the west veranda to show her where he had once thought of buying a piece of property some distance up the river, and Virginia and Jonathan Livingston found themselves alone in the library.

Virginia looked around a moment, then seated herself in a low chair, and drawing back the curtains looked through the window at the moon just rising over the trees.

"Isn't it queer how people's tastes differ," she said, nodding first at the veranda and then toward the fireplace. "Some like it hot and some like it cold, though the preference is often a matter of convenience—to-night, for instance," and she smiled at Joyce's well-known propensity for shivering and Elizabeth's for suffocating.

Livingston lowered the light until it was soft and shaded, then he sat down beside her.

"And you?" he asked. "How do you like it—hot or cold?"

"Neither. I am so commonplace that I prefer a happy medium. There is nothing of the heroic in me, and I don't like extremes in anything."

He leaned back and looked at her curiously.

"You have acquired wisdom, if not length of days," he said presently. "Usually it is on the way down, not up, that one realizes life is better run on a level."

"But do people ever realize it," she interrupted, "or rather aren't the people who realize it cowards like I am? I don't want to go through life on a dead level, but I am afraid of great heights and deep depths. I might fall from one and not rise from the other, and either would be humiliating. I think on the whole it would be safer to keep the middle of the road and avoid oceans and mountains if possible," and she touched the tips of her fingers together and looked half seriously into his face.

"Unquestionably it would be safer, but unfortunately we don't have the right of way always, and before we know it we've knocked into somebody or something that breaks up the path we prefer to follow."

"That is very true, but if we are bumped into it may be because we are taking up more than our share of room," and she smiled slightly.

"Perhaps," and Livingston shaded his eyes with his hand as he rested his elbow on the table—"perhaps that is true, but I don't object to a little bumping, and I'm certain I don't like dead levels. I prefer a little climbing; it makes one get a better point of view."

“You mean it makes us see farther? I suppose it does do that. It shows us many things in the distance, but it sometimes keeps us from seeing others close at hand, and the things that are far from us are not always most worth having. No doubt,” and she hesitated slightly—“no doubt I am very old-fashioned, but I think I love best the things that are close to me.”

By length of days Livingston was more than ten years Virginia’s senior, and in experience ten times ten, but as he watched her he wondered how she had discovered the truths that time only is supposed to teach, and he wondered also if in her he had found another type of the woman species, and the wonder made him sigh slightly.

He got up after a moment and closed the window at his back, and as he did so Virginia laughed softly.

“I see how you don’t like it,” she said, without turning her head in his direction, “and yet I doubt very much if you would like it very warm. After all, you’re just not quite as honest as I am. But, Mr. Livingston”—changing the subject rather abruptly—“we haven’t half thanked you for the flowers you sent from Hampstead. Portia wrote a note, I know, but we each want to thank you ourselves. The house would have looked forlorn without them, for nothing ever takes their place, and it was very good of you to send such beautiful ones.”

“It is very good of you to put it in that way,” he answered, smiling doubtfully. “However,

the pleasure was mine, for I was not at all sure McRae could get up a decent lot. But the lilacs on the table? They were not from Hampstead."

"Oh, no! They were from Virginia," she replied, getting up as Joyce and Brydon came in and the others were heard coming down the hall. "George sent those because he knows I love them so. It was very good in him to remember, but then George never forgets."

She turned to Brydon, then glanced at the clock in surprise. "Did you know it was after eleven, Portia?" she called. "I did not know it had struck ten."

"It didn't," laughed Brydon, "the hour vanished without record; but Portia says we've got to go."

In the good-nights that followed, Brydon drew Portia aside and put his hands on her shoulders so he could better see her face.

"Joyce tells me I made a mess of it to-night," he said a little anxiously. "But I thought of all people on earth you could see the difference between familiarity and a lack of formality, and John is like my brother, you know."

Portia looked up almost wearily.

"Yes, I know, dear, but other people don't. We must not talk of it to-night, however. It will be all right, no doubt, and of course I understand how you meant it," and she turned to tell Irving good-night.

They drove off in the moonlight to Hampstead some two miles away, and soon in both houses there was deep sleep and darkness for all save the owners of each.

Hour after hour Jonathan Livingston sat by his open window and let the cool night air blow upon his face. Not until the dawn was breaking did he leave it, and then he opened his door and walked rapidly down the hall to the room in which Brydon slept. He entered it and roused him none too gently.

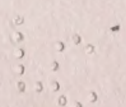
“Brydon,” he said, shaking him again and again, “who is the George that sent the lilacs to Spinstervilla? George who?”

Brydon roused himself grumblingly.

“Who is who?” he asked sleepily. “Who sent the lilacs? Oh, George Nelson, Virginia’s cousin I believe. What in the Devil do you want to know this time of night for?” and by the time Livingston had reached the door Brydon was asleep again.

Over at Spinstervilla Portia lay still and sleepless in her bed while the hours ticked themselves slowly away, and the silence of the house was as that in which there is no life.

When at last she fell asleep she dreamed she was standing in an unknown land, and with her arms around Virginia was keeping off a surging multitude of indefinable shapes that were pressing her close, and filling her beautiful eyes with doubt and distress and despair; and the question in them was one that Portia dare not face, for it was one she dare not answer for her.



CHAPTER X

It was Portia who decided that the summer should be a long, delicious holiday, and her decision was accepted without protest.

Portia was very proud of her girls. Unmindful that it was her guidance that had led them into those fields in which they could do most effective work, and out of others for which they had no vital power or technical skill; unmindful that it was her firm but helpful grasp which had held them there until they had served their apprenticeship well, had done their drudgery faithfully, she only saw now that they were worthy members of that large sisterhood of women who work intelligently and persistently, and therefore successfully, and she was proud of them, very proud.

Each was making an income that was satisfactory and that promised well for the future; but if others envied them as having acquired it through genius, or luck, or influence, they judged wrongly. They were making it through singleness of purpose and the use of the gift they believed they could best develop, and their success had been gained, as success demands ever to be gained, after months and years of intelligent toil and persistent preparation.

This summer, however, they had earned their rest, and they should have it, Portia had declared. After the first of June no work should be done until October. Four months of holiday, four months of happiness, four months of luxurious do-nothingness! they had cried joyfully, and the coming days looked very bright and beautiful.

For each of them this change of rest and relaxation was a timely one, but for Elizabeth it was especially so. Slender and frail in body, she had barely enough flesh and blood and bone to keep her soul from showing, Joyce told her continually; but the lack of flesh and blood and bone was overcome by an unusual supply of nerve power, and it was a continual source of anxiety to the others that she was so reckless in her demands upon the latter.

Her deep, dark eyes were clear and bright, and flashed or faded as the mood possessed her, while her soft black hair was a sharp contrast to the olive complexion of her face, which rarely had color in it. Intense in her feelings, she neither loved nor hated half way, and Portia had seen from the first that hers was a friendship well worth the having.

By that indefinable adjustment which natures of absolute oppositeness frequently make to the surprise of themselves, Elizabeth and Portia had been drawn toward each other by the law of contrast, and their comradeship, based upon the recognition of their vital differences, had

through those very differences grown close and deep and tender, and made the one the complement of the other. Unsparing of herself, Elizabeth spent her energy lavishly, and Portia understood well that had the holiday not come to her at Spinstervilla, it would have been necessary to have found one somewhere else.

The days passed quickly, too quickly because so happily, and the adjusting of their lives to the conditions of the new life was accomplished very easily and with ready abandonment on the part of each.

The days were not idle days, however. A full measure of recreation and pleasure-making was pressed into each, and Portia and Elizabeth were beginning to realize that they were getting just a little tired of the continual demands upon their time that Brydon and Livingston were constantly making in their repeated invitations to take this and that little trip and to go on this or that little outing.

"It isn't that I don't enjoy going," Elizabeth had declared in confidence one night to Portia, "but I am beginning to realize I'm a spinster in more than name, and I get tired of so much frolicking. The trips on Mr. Livingston's yacht ought to be blissful, and we're the luckiest lot of old maids on earth to have one at our disposal, but I never could bear a boat. I always feel too as if I ought to walk with my eyes shut for fear of seeing something I oughtn't. A man on a boat with a girl and a

moon means future trouble. Last week I nearly sat down in Brydon's lap—fortunately I got in Joyce's instead. They were huddled together in a little dark corner like two anarchists, and of course I didn't see them. I thought they were in the bow of the boat with Virginia and Mr. Livingston, and went staggering along with my head in the air—it was the night the water was so rough—and the first thing I knew I was pretty nearly in Brydon's arms."

She laughed good-naturedly, then looked at Portia perplexedly.

"How are things progressing, Portia? Has Joyce said anything lately?"

"Not a word," and Portia smiled slightly at the look on Elizabeth's face. "I think, however, it will be all right in time. Sometimes I imagine Joyce hardly realizes herself the cause of her indecision; but if Brydon were a poor man she would not keep him waiting so long for a final answer. She is testing her own heart unconsciously, and it has pleased me greatly that she is not letting any other considerations have weight with her than her love for him and his love for her."

Elizabeth laid down the book she had been reading and clasped her hands behind her head.

"It would be a temptation to some women, perhaps, to have great wealth offered them, but I do not think it is to Joyce. She is too inherently honest to be swayed by things of that

sort; but if she loves Brydon, I can't imagine why she will not promise to marry him."

"I think she is not quite ready to make such a promise yet—is not quite sure. If the test should ever come, however, Brydon need not fear. They are both young enough to do a little waiting, and Brydon knows it is best to let her take her own time. I want this summer to be a happy one," Portia continued slowly, "and for the present, at least, it is wiser perhaps not to look into the future."

Unconsciously she sighed a little quivering sigh that she quickly tried to hide, but Elizabeth's keen ears heard it and a wave of tender sympathy swept over her, for she understood well what it meant.

Elizabeth was by nature a "protester." All of her life she had been repudiating assertions and assurances which were ready made, and by those who did not know or understand the eagerness of her questioning heart to learn the deep truths of life, its deeper mysteries and its surest hope, she was regarded with a sort of Christian horror as a young woman who had views which it was not proper for young women to have. Elizabeth didn't pretend to be proper. She went to church regularly, stayed through the service, and let the music, and particularly Virginia's part of it, take her into that wonder world of hope and peace and trust which one can only enter through revelation; and then she would slip out and go down

among the poor, or to some quiet spot in the park, or in the country where she could be still and listen to God, and let her spirit reach out after His; would go where there would be no jarring interpretation of His word or of His mission among men; and then she would come back home quietly, and the light in her face would show that the day had had its lesson for her.

In many matters she did not altogether agree with conventional points of view, and yet she was careful not to thrust her own upon others. When she heard the smothered sigh of Portia she knew well what had caused it and her heart went out toward her with a patience that no one else but Portia could have excited, for toward no one else would she have felt it.

She took up a calendar from the table near which she sat and looked at it carelessly, then as she realized the date she put it down slowly. Less than three months ago a new friend had come into their lives. Less than three months ago they had met Mr. Livingston accidentally on the veranda of their still unfinished house, and from that day to the present she had seen that he was a force to be reckoned with, had seen too that Portia had instantly felt the power of his presence. She had watched him closely, had seen him carefully control his every word and look and act, and in her heart had smiled to think how impossible it was for a man of his nature to long restrain himself—and yet he thought the secret was still his own.

She glanced across at Portia. Why did things in life get so terribly twisted? Why did Portia not rejoice that the love of such a man was given to her sister? And why did she perplex herself with questions that could not be answered?

The thought rather stifled her, and she got up and went out on the veranda, where Livingston was telling to Joyce and Virginia the story of a Samoan experience. Brydon was off on a visit to his mother, and during his absence there had been a lull in their drives and golf, their yachting parties and little trips to nearby resorts. They had missed him strangely and were planning a happy welcome for him on his return.

After his mother had established herself in her summer home, Brydon had established himself at Hampstead, and though both he and Livingston went daily into the city, when not off on a short trip on the latter's yacht, they usually returned by an early train and their evenings were invariably spent at Spinstervilla. Irving and Laurie too were frequently with them, and the summer promised to be very happy, and each day that went by was begrudged by the members of Portia's little household as they rested in their first luxurious holiday for many years.

Elizabeth stood in the doorway for a moment watching the group in front of her, and then she called Joyce in to show her a piece of lace she was making.

"Joyce doesn't know it," laughed Virginia, "but she's as restless as a bird when Brydon is away. I don't believe she's sat in one place two minutes at a time to-day."

"And yet she will not marry him," said Livingston. "If she loves him, why does she torment him with this uncertainty? Surely woman is the enigma of all ages!"

"And Joyce is so verily a woman," and Virginia laughed again. "She presumes upon the prerogative of her sex in being incomprehensible, I suppose, but Brydon is hardly suffering. Some day she will marry him, but she is not ready to do so yet."

"But that is the incomprehensible part of it," Livingston urged a little impatiently. "If she is some day going to marry him, why make it an indefinite matter? Life is too short to be spent in separation from those one loves, and no man or woman has the right to trifle with the happiness of another."

"She is not trifling with his happiness," answered Virginia quickly. "She is only testing her own heart that she may be certain there is no shadow of doubt or mistrust in it. Brydon can well afford to be patient, for Joyce will not compromise with anything but the best her whole heart and soul can give."

Livingston did not answer, and Virginia, leaning back in her chair, looked out into space as if she were speaking to some one far away.

"Love does not come alike to all," she said

presently. "Some know it instantly and feel its power at once, while others hesitate and are afraid. No one can judge or understand, perhaps, its meaning to another."

Livingston leaned over and looked at her gravely.

"And you," he asked gently, "how will love come to you?"

She got up from her chair and moved toward the door.

"I do not know," she answered slowly, and in the darkness her face whitened. "I think we had better go in, it has turned so cool and damp."

CHAPTER XI

Refuse to admit it; treat it indifferently when happening to mention it; be a little ashamed of the flush of pleasure its receipt created, nevertheless, in the heart of its recipient an invitation to the home of Mrs. Jenifer Irskine Field never failed to excite a thrill of social exultation that was rarely caused by any other envelope, be its contents signed by whomsoever it may.

Had Mrs. Jenifer Irskine Field been a man she would have been a leader along those lines which would have placed her on a pinnacle, where she could have been seen, but not touched by the madding crowd which had put her there; but not being a man she had wisely considered the various and separate circles into which humanity is divided, and, after deliberate contemplation, had concluded that the one in which she would reign must be exclusively limited. More than her share of worldly wisdom had come to this lady aristocratic even in the days of her youth; and knowing full well that her wit and beauty must be supplemented by wealth if she would rule in the world of her choice, she had deliberately exchanged them both in consideration of a marriage dower that would place her where she wished.

Her husband was many years her senior, and a short while after the birth of her only child, Brydon, he had been considerate enough to bow himself out of the way and leave her a young widow with much wealth to her credit and a baby boy to keep up the name.

It was an act of delicate thoughtfulness on his part of which she had hardly thought him capable, and the result was an agreeable memory and the conviction that she had been ever a faithful and devoted wife.

She was a far-seeing woman, also, was Brydon Field's mother, and she had early learned that people and sheep have similar propensities. As she preferred to lead rather than follow, she came back to New York, after an absence of some years abroad, and very quietly but firmly established herself as an exclusive element of that rather heterogeneous whole which society has classed as society.

Most people want to go where most people can't go, and recognizing this, in a carefully discriminating way Mrs. Jenifer Irskine Field began to ask a few friends and foreigners to her really very beautiful home to meet a few other friends and foreigners, who perhaps were already there, or who were visiting the city. And the culling of her list was so markedly evident that the goats who were cut out were gradually ignored by the sheep who were let in, and in time it was thoroughly understood that as a social autocrat Mrs. Field was an acknowledged

success. Extreme wealth could not force an entrance within her guarded doors were it unaccompanied by some other desirable passport, and genius might knock in vain at her portals had it not been properly placed by time which had weighed it well. Understanding fully that human nature demands limitation as a supreme climax to its social structure, she had given evidence of her qualities of leadership by ever maintaining a strict observance of her rule to allow no one to enter her realm save those to whom she personally extended the right of admittance. And her little world had followed and had thought itself a big world, the biggest, greatest world of all worlds, because it was so little and so limited, and because its garments had been designed by a woman who made them after a pattern which few could wear.

That Brydon was the son of such a mother was one of nature's perversities—one of her misfits which she every now and then tosses into the human family to torment it with perplexity as to how it got there; and though for years Mrs. Field had refused to believe she would not conquer him in the end, of late she had realized that the final issue was but a matter of time. She had long known that his warm, sunny nature was as firm and unyielding as her colder, sterner one, and she also understood that when the clash did come it might be defeat for her but never surrender from him.

That it should not come was the one thing in life she was most decided upon. And yet she

was horribly conscious that the fear in her heart which had been born when she had learned of Portia's life in New York would one day prove uncontrollable, and her jealous antagonism toward her express itself in a way that Brydon would never forget or forgive. She realized bitterly that even as a boy she had had no influence whatever over him, but that Portia had had a most powerful one, and she had hated Portia for it; and the first serious encounter she had ever had with Brydon was when she refused to invite the former to her house as he had requested her to do when he had discovered her in the city, struggling to earn her daily bread.

Up to the time of this discovery no anxious thought concerning his future had ever entered his mother's heart; but since then, though the change was slow and subtle, she could not fail to see that a new atmosphere had come into his life, and that a steady strengthening of some rather irritating tendencies which he had early developed had gradually grown more pronounced, and more and more difficult had it become to keep him up to the requirements of his social position.

She knew little of the life her nieces led. She did all that civility required in making them a semi-annual visit and in having sent to them at Christmas a remembrance of the day, and having done this she wished nothing more to be said about them. Portia and Virginia, and

their two friends, had joined the ranks of the women who work. She did not know women who worked. There were many who did it, she understood, but they were not of her kind, and she did not wish to hear anything concerning them. It was not required of her to know how the world moved on, or how men and women made their way within it. It was hers to keep inviolate the sacred circle of earth's favored few; and that her son should find pleasure in going outside his own peculiar province was as incomprehensible as it was mortifying, and as mortifying as it was true.

All this and more she had realized for several years past, but never had the subject been mentioned between them since the day she had expressed to Brydon her disapproval of his frequent visits to his cousins, and he had very politely, but firmly, intimated that he was entirely capable of deciding that question for himself.

Brydon had controlled himself, but she saw instantly that she had made a mistake, and the fear was born that something more than cousinly interest must be prompting his persistency in retaining a friendship that he knew so well was in opposition to her wishes. For some time this fear smouldered in her heart as a hateful possibility, and when later it threatened to become a certainty she could stand it no longer, and in a moment of desperation she did the unusual thing of calling upon Portia in a much more informal way than was her custom.

When she reentered her carriage she called to the coachman to drive in the park,—drive, though the day was cold,—drive until she told him to stop; and two tiny red spots on her cheeks told of a heat which burnt deep within her heart. She had found out the cause of Brydon's loyalty and love for his cousins. For his cousins! Bah! Not Portia, not Virginia, nor the slender girl they called Elizabeth, but that tall, handsome one with her Irish gray-blue eyes, and splendid wealth of rippling, reddish hair, and hands that a Hebe might have envied. She knew her at once, knew her just as the girl knew why she had come. There had been a subtle electric current transmitted suddenly from each, and the challenge was sharp and silent, and accepted instantly by both. Had the girl been of her son's world she would have made a glorious figure in it. Her head was not put upon her shoulders to droop—it was meant to be held high and straight, and she held it so full well.

But who was she? Who was she? An unknown struggler in the world of art. A designer of some kind who did something for book covers and magazines; who illustrated stories and made miniatures of children, and did various other things; a girl who, if her eyes or fingers gave out, would lose her weapons of defense against a big, wide world. And her son in love with this? *Her* son! She brought her lips down closely together and lifted her

veil that the air might cool her burning face, which grew white with fear and then red with anger. Anger that after all her years of training this should be the result; and fear that though she and all his world would resent his marriage with an obscure member of an unknown society, it would no more affect his decision to do so than the babbling of the brook she was passing would loosen the rock over which it tumbled.

She did not mention this visit to Brydon, but she understood perfectly well that he knew all about it, and when a few weeks later she announced her intention of going to London for a short stay, she was not surprised at his refusal to accompany her.

In response to her cable he had come, however; but finding it impossible to keep him there she had promptly returned with him. When she learned, on reaching home, that Jonathan Livingston had also gotten back, she felt as if the enemy were indeed closing in around her; and a deadly sickness seized her at the thought that one word of his would have more weight with Brydon than all of her life teaching or desires.

She disliked Livingston fervidly. He had a way of making one feel that pretense was unnecessary and platitudes a pretense. Nevertheless, even she could not afford to ignore him, and if perhaps she could win him to her point of view, she might yet be able to overcome

what she still refused to believe was but a piece of boyish infatuation on Brydon's part, for a pretty face.

All this she had thought over carefully, and then had issued invitations to a dinner party in his honor, which should be the last before her city home was closed for the season; and it was after this dinner that she intended to find out just what Livingston knew or just what he would tell.

As she waited for her guests she leaned back in her chair and tapped her lips slightly and absently with her fan, and as Brydon entered the room the blood in her heart thickened and her throat contracted strangely. He came toward her with his watch in his hand. "Commend me," he said lightly; "I am actually ready ten minutes ahead of time. Isn't it pretty warm in here?"

He walked over to a side window and opened it and let the fresh night air come in, then came back and rested his elbow on the mantel. As he stood there leaning easily against it, his clean-shaven face gave him, at the first glance, a boyish look that made him seem younger than he was; but the lines about his mouth were firm and strong, and the dark gray eyes which were usually full of a jolly sort of light were to-night full of purpose, and looking at him his mother knew he was a man, every inch of him, and a deep, bitter resentment against the girl whom she feared had won his heart filled her with

sudden rage. An irresistible desire to ask him if it were true, swept violently over her, and though she knew it was a dangerous subject, and to-night a particularly unwise time to touch upon it, she yielded to the recklessness that, at his entrance into the room, had seized her, and felt that she must know the truth or suffocate before the evening was over.

All the repressed anxiety of months past came up in one great leap, and though she had not intended to throw down the gauntlet, she threw it now bitterly—threw it in desperation and despair, because of the light that was in his eyes, and because of the grave gentleness in his face.

She leaned back yet farther in her chair, and her eyelids half covered her eyes as she opened and shut her fan nervously, and then suddenly she sat upright.

“I was congratulated this afternoon,” she said, after a moment of oppressive silence, her voice cold and hard, “on the approaching marriage of my son to a young woman whose name had not been heard, or, rather, not recognized. May I ask if the name is one that I know?”

The scorn in her voice sent the hot blood over Brydon’s face in one great wave, then left it white—whiter than she had ever seen it. He looked at his mother steadily for a moment as he still leaned against the mantel, then drew a deep breath before he answered.

“You are at liberty to ask any question you wish,” he said presently, putting both hands in

his pockets and setting his back squarely against the mantel. "I am sorry your congratulations are a little premature, however. To tell you they were in order would be a supreme happiness; but while it is very true I have asked Miss Symington to be my wife, as yet she has not consented to do so; in fact, for the present, she refuses to discuss the matter with me."

At his words his mother rose slowly from her chair.

"Has not consented to be your wife—refuses to discuss the matter with you?" she repeated incredulously. "And why, may I ask?"

The scorn and unbelief in her voice made it shrill and high, and for once she was deaf to its lack of modulation.

"She has not told me why. I rather imagine, however, she does not think she would be a dutiful daughter-in-law," and Brydon smiled grimly.

"Nor a desirable one, she also no doubt knows," sneered his mother.

"No, she does not know that—nor do I," he answered quickly, for the first time speaking sharply. "And I must beg you to remember, mother, that the woman you are speaking of is the woman I have asked to be my wife. I have wanted to talk with you about this before, for it is only right that you should hear from me and not from others that my marriage is dependent only upon her consent; and that

I have not done so is because I knew you did not care to hear it, and had no word of welcome for her or sympathy for me. That I am marrying against your approval I know most regretfully; but that with or without it I shall marry Joyce, if she will marry me, I want you to understand right now, to-night; and moreover, should she consent to become my wife, as I pray God she may, she must be received as your daughter or else you will lose a son."

"Then I will lose a son!"

The words rang out defiantly, and the woman who uttered them looked with blazing eyes at the man opposite, and a passion of love and hate ran rapidly over her handsome, haughty face. For the first time in her life she had been brought to bay, for the first time defied, and the fury of it made her forget herself, made her unmindful of her words.

Brydon shrugged his shoulders and bowed slightly.

"As you will," he said indifferently, and started to leave the room.

She motioned him back.

"May I ask who is this woman you intend to marry?"

"When you ask properly, you may."

She laughed insolently.

"The lady whom you propose to marry—this Miss Symington," and she bowed sweepingly. "May I ask who she is?"

"She is a lady who does not find it necessary to proclaim her pedigree—it speaks for itself;

and as I am in love with her, not her ancestors, I have never inquired concerning them."

For a moment each stood confronting the other as do those fencing in a duel that promises to be deadly, but before either could speak again the first of their guests were announced, and Brydon turning to greet them, masked well his face from the anger and hurt in his heart.

The dinner was a perfect one—Mrs. Field's dinners were always perfect; and as Mr. Livingston glanced around the table with its costly appointments and noiseless service, the remembrance of the supper at Spinstervilla came over him as a cool, fresh breath in the perfumed air of a close conservatory, and the girl who was sitting next to him had to ask twice if he found New York much changed, before he heard or answered her.

"I beg pardon," he said quickly, turning toward her. "Do I find New York much changed? Yes, I suppose I do, though the people, more than the place, seem strange to me. It doesn't take twenty years to make a Rip Van Winkle of a man, so far as the spot he once filled is concerned. Many years less will make a change in anything or anybody—except a woman, of course—and I haven't exactly gotten people placed just yet. The girl over there with McCabe, who is she? Did I ever know her?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not," laughed Miss Brown, taking up an olive and eyeing it crit-

ically. "She wore short frocks and plaited hair when you left New York, and gave no evidence whatever of becoming a beauty. She's Jack van Hern's youngest sister, and her engagement has just been announced to Major Julian Dupree."

"Major Julian Dupree? Not the Julian Dupree who married Frances Gillette? I had not heard his wife was dead."

"She isn't—she's alive again. Major Julian and she found out they had made a mistake, and so they wisely decided to undo it. She took the child and married some one she liked better. He has enjoyed his fling to the full, but he's concluded to go into bondage again. Foolish man, isn't he?"

The girl at his side rattled on, and Livingston, only half heeding, wondered who she was and where she had come from. She was a stranger, yet her face was slightly familiar, and he felt tempted to ask her if she too had worn short frocks and plaited hair when he went away; but a glance at her when she turned to speak to the man on her other side made him see it would be a wrong question and he wisely withheld it.

"The woman near the end of the table, the one with Mr. Field—do you know her?" she asked, turning to him again. "She is said to be the handsomest woman in New York, and the most stupid. Her blood is royal purple, however, and she's a daughter of Croesus, also,

so of course nothing else matters. She has a habit of setting men crazy, I understand. Her eyes are more dangerous than dynamite. Aren't you afraid for your friend's safety?"

"Not exactly; Brydon isn't that kind. Who is the man next to Miss van Hern on her left?"

"The Hon. Sir Richard Craven. Mrs. Field is decidedly English in her tendencies and hopes in another life to be able to conceal the fact that she's entirely American. Do you know the girl with him?"

Livingston shook his head.

"Mrs. Field evidently thinks I need repairing socially. She has surrounded me almost entirely with strangers to-night. I have met them, of course, but the names made little impression. Unfortunately names refuse to stick to me, somehow."

"Then don't go in for politics, or you'd flunk badly. I wonder if you know what my name is and where I came from?"

"Not where you came from, but your name isn't a strain," and Livingston laughingly raised a glass of water to his lips.

The girl laughed also.

"To be born a Brown is bearable only from lack of responsibility, but to marry a Brown is unpardonable, and yet the dearest woman at this table deliberately did it. Love played her a trick and she's never once regretted it."

Livingston glanced in the direction she indicated and the woman opposite him looked up at the same time.

"We've been speculating about you for the last five minutes," she said, nodding to him gaily. "And now, perhaps, you can help us decide the question. Porterfield says you won't be in New York six months before you'll be longing for bears and bugs and icebergs to write about, and when I tell him I don't believe it he says I know nothing about it. Now tell him he is wrong and that you are really going to settle down and stay home. My boys are aching with curiosity to hear every detail of your African experiences, and I promised them to-night they should do so soon if I had to have you brought down in a patrol wagon."

Livingston laughed easily.

"It won't be necessary. I haven't forgotten that your will is law. I'm coming round one day this week, and if you'll trust the boys with me, I'll take them out to Hampstead and show them one or two things they might like to see."

Mrs. Brown clasped her hands enthusiastically.

"What bliss for the boys! By the way, speaking of Hampstead reminds me of a new story. Roy Dimmock spent a day or so with Mr. Sexton last week and he says the latter is very much upset over some new neighbors who have built an old-fashioned house on the prettiest piece of property in that section. He bought several acres of it from its new owner—some old maid, he says, and he would have bought it all rather than have had these un-

known quantities come up there to live. He can't find out anything about them except that the place is called Spinstervilla and is occupied by four spinsters. Thus far he hasn't met one of them, and Roy says he is downright ugly in his insinuations about them."

Brydon stirred uneasily, as if he would interrupt the speaker; but Livingston, toying carelessly with a slender glass, spoke first.

"Sexton is a fool and always has been. If he wants to know anything of his new neighbors, whom I have the honor of knowing, I can tell him whatever is necessary. It would be just as well, however, for him to confine his inquiries to me, or Brydon, for they are ladies who are not accustomed to having their names handed around in public."

A subtle shiver ran quickly over every spinal column present, as Livingston's words reached even the ends of the table, and a silence that was rather ominous fell suddenly upon the chatter of a moment before. Sexton had been called a fool and at Mrs. Field's table! All present agreed with the assertion, but they only mentioned it in private, for Sexton's name represented too much in the world of wealth and fashion to be handled other than guardedly; but it was delicious to witness such an exhibition of nerve, and Mrs. Brown, at least, enjoyed it immensely.

"Don't say I said it," she laughed, "but I think Roy rather agrees with you. But who are these charming mysteries, and from whence

do they come, and whither do they go, and why do they brand themselves as Spinsters?"

Brydon leaned forward and took a few almonds from a dish and smiled provokingly at the two rows of faces which were waiting an answer, but for a moment or two he did not speak. A mystery has a magical effect, and a woman and a mystery is too much for flesh and blood, no matter how well trained, and except at Mrs. Field's end of the table, where she kept up an animated conversation, a silence had fallen upon all.

Brydon put an almond in his mouth and held another between his fingers, while with his eyes he signaled Livingston to let him speak.

"I hardly think the occupants of Spinsterville can be called mysteries," he said pleasantly, turning to Mrs. Brown—"though charming they undoubtedly are. From whence they came I can tell you readily, but whither they go is a matter of anxiety to more than one of their friends—to me for instance."

He took another almond, and though his face was white, he nodded at Livingston and they both laughed.

Miss van Hern clapped her hands energetically.

"The mystery is solved, is solved!" she cried, almost rising from her chair. "We've been hearing all sorts of fairy tales about you, Brydon, and now the secret is out. She lives at Spinsterville, and she isn't a spinster at all. Here's to the unknown! Drink—all of you!"

Every glass near her was raised, but a crash at the end of the table caused some slight confusion. Mrs. Field had sacrificed her gown to distract attention, but the sacrifice was unsuccessful.

"Thanks, awfully," said Brydon, wiping his lips carefully. "If you've heard anything nice lately I hope it will all come true, but just at present I'm not very hopeful. However, as the owner of Spinstervilla is my best-loved cousin, and almost sister, I'm afraid you've gotten things slightly mixed. Mr. Atkins, you probably remember Miss Deming, who visited my mother a good many years ago; and if so you can tell Mrs. Brown that Portia is not a mystery, but genuine flesh and blood, can't you?"

The man addressed—a large, handsome man, with classic face and iron-gray hair—took off his glasses and held them in his hand as he looked at Brydon incredulously.

"Do I remember?" he repeated slowly. "Do you mean to say she is living in New York?"

His hand trembled slightly as he lifted a wine glass, and several around the table looked at each other significantly. Things were getting interesting. They had often wondered why Gervas Atkins had never married.

"She is living very near the city, though it has been only a short while since she left it," answered Brydon, remembering for the first time some story he had once heard about Atkins and Portia, and regretting he had asked

him about her. "Less than a year ago she had some money and a piece of property left her, and she has built a home on the latter, which is most pleasantly located overlooking the river and only a short ride from town. She has named the place Spinstervilla because of its appropriateness, she says; for her sister, Virginia, lives with her, and two friends, Miss Polk of Georgia and Miss Symington of South Carolina."

"But why have we been debarred the pleasure of meeting them?" asked Sir Richard Craven, leaning over and peering at Brydon through his monocle. "It would be a great privilege to meet your cousins, I am sure," and he bowed sweepingly in Mrs. Field's direction.

The latter rose from her seat, and immediately all followed her example; but Brydon, looking at her, refused to be silent.

"I am also very sure of it, Sir Richard, but unfortunately my cousins refuse to be met. They are very busy women, who for some time past have been struggling with the realities of life, and as they cannot work and play both, they refuse to come back into the world from which the loss of their money made them necessarily withdraw."

As Brydon stopped, the men stood aside to let the ladies pass out, and the look his mother gave him was not lost upon them, for each man present felt himself possessed of a sudden desire to shake hands with him, and to shake hands good and hard.

CHAPTER XII

Indecision had never been a characteristic of Jonathan Livingston, and when, after a long absence, he decided to return home, he had taken passage in the first ship going out after he reached Liverpool. Two weeks later he had secured apartments in the city, opened a law office, and had a force of workmen at Hampstead, his country home, getting it in order as a depository for his things and as a place where he could welcome his friends.

That his life had been rather a tragic one was the opinion of these friends rather than himself. His past he had put resolutely behind him, and a retrospect of it was something he rarely indulged in. But now that he was back in New York, back in its pitiless, restless, splendid life, he was forced to face his past in order to form his future, and the sharpest sensation he had had for years was the conviction that a new and strange significance had come suddenly into it. That it was no dead yesterday which was behind him, he realized as he had never thought to do since time had partially healed the hideous mistake of his youth, and the realization came from a source as unexpected as it was positive.

When he had started back to his own country it was with a rather vague purpose of taking up his old life and doing the best he could with it. But no definite line of work had suggested itself, and not until a remark of Virginia's, one day, had started a discussion concerning some recent political movement did he decide to look more fully into certain conditions of his own city, and to-night as he sat in his office he was wondering what she would think of the plunge he had made into municipal matters.

The shrill cry of a newsboy came up from the street below, and leaving his chair Livingston went over to the window and looked out. The street was bordered on either side by great, towering buildings, which threw grotesque shadows on the circle of electric lights at the corners, and the people strolling, rushing, riding by made it a picture too full of fascination to be easily shut from view. For some time he stood there looking down on the shifting stream of humanity which hurried by only to be replaced by recruits from the same exhaustless store, then came back to a table in the centre of the room and opened a paper lying upon it.

He smiled slightly at the picture on its front page, a picture of himself, and he wondered for a moment if he really was like the thing it represented. It was not a flattering thing to be like, but the picture was soon forgotten in the article which he began to read, and before he

had finished his face was an indignant frown. He read the article through, then tossed the paper aside and lighted a cigar. Only a short while back in New York, and already before the public in a way peculiarly objectionable to himself. He puffed silently for a while with his head upon the back of his chair and his hands in his pockets, and as the frown gradually cleared away a grim smile replaced it, and resolution strong and determined fixed itself upon his face. It was not a handsome face, but it was one men trusted and women believed in, and the purpose in it to-night spoke well for the cause he had undertaken to champion.

His years of absence in foreign lands had made him a stranger in his own, consequently, on his return to New York, he had taken a survey of the entire city in company with his Irish man-servant, who knew each core of its separate centres; and the result of his survey had been a curious mixture of conflicting emotions.

Not a district or street had been left unexplored. He was one of its citizens again and it was his business to know his city, its good and its bad parts; its method of government, its political organizations, its boards and commissions, and all else that concerned it, and when after some weeks he had been over most of the ground superficially, and over some carefully, he was sick at heart at many things he

saw, indignant at others, and proud again of others still. But the thing he was most ashamed of was not the crime and corruption of a city so big and powerful as his own; not the poverty and pollution, the degradation and despair of that large part of it which huddles together in obscure holes and corners and fights savagely with death and disease; not the political machinery which runs under the guidance of human hucksters who give and take, and buy and sell, the control of the city's government for the largest personal consideration; not the hopelessness of this side of its life stirred him most deeply—but the fatal apathy, the scornful indifference, the careless unconcern of the other who let it alone, and shrugged its shoulders and went on its way, and ate and drank and was merry, and heeded not the sin and suffering it did not care to see.

Perhaps it was because it was rather new to him that it stirred him so deeply. He had begun his investigations from a desire for information rather than personal concern, but day by day he found himself borne on by an ever-widening flood of human interest; and as he penetrated more and more into the heart of it all and looked into results, which as usual were only the sequence of causes, he felt a continually developing spirit of intolerance toward those who sat in cushioned chairs and deplored the sin and misery of the world and lifted not their fingers to make it less.

His experiences in life had been varied, and much of his knowledge of men and morals had been gained at first hand, and he had rather thought he was prepared for most phases of character and most forms of weakness and wickedness; but under his new teacher he soon found he was but a novice in the study of human depravity and duplicity—in which science this same teacher, Michael O'Brien, was an expert and a scholar.

Michael had been in Livingston's employ for some time before the latter left New York, and during his absence he had been left in charge of certain matters which paid him well and took little of his time, consequently the natural bent of his race for politics had been strongly developed, and Michael was something of a leader in his district; and it was a grievance of his that brought Livingston face to face with a condition of affairs about which he had read, but concerning which he was, personally, entirely ignorant.

For several years past some effort had been made to have a certain block of houses in Mike's district condemned by the city in order that they might be removed and a play-ground provided for the children of that neighborhood. Mike's whole heart and soul were interested in this matter, and when, after much work and political manipulation, there seemed a fair chance of its being finally consummated, the whole thing fell through by a piece of traitor-

ship on the part of some who had hitherto been its strongest supporters.

“It was that damned son of sin Billy McCoy what did the dirty work, sir,” Mike said to Livingston a few days after it happened. “I knowed he was a snivelling sneak, but I didn’t know he was on to the agents of the property like he was. You see, sir, the folks, or the estate what owns that block, don’t want it pulled down. They knows it pays well, and taxes is low in that part of the city, and the man what runs it for ’em has sent down here time and agin to talk me out of it, and he wa’n’t stingy neither. He promised to make it all right to me if I would let it drop, and jes’ to shut him up I made out like I would. But I didn’t touch his money, sir, not a dollar. I told him we’d fix about that later. That’s where I was a durned fool, sir. He was suspicious of me because I didn’t take the money at once and that’s how he bought out Billy McCoy. Damn ’em, sir! They all ought to be strung up for their dirty work in keepin’ the air and sunshine from the babies what gasps their life out for want of it! ‘Scusin’ of the word, it does me good to be sayin’ ‘damn the whole crowd of ’em!’” and Mike wiped the perspiration off his face despairingly.

That was how Livingston got into it; first through sympathy for Mike’s bitter disappointment, and afterwards from genuine interest in the matter itself.

Mike's knowledge of, and experience in, affairs political were worth more than many columns of theory on the subject, and Livingston, realizing his practical ignorance of the same, had gone very quietly to work in the primary grades in Mike's district, wherein was taught by objective method, "Municipal Matters and How They Are Run." And if he learned some things that made him grow white in the face and draw his eyebrows together sharply, he nevertheless persisted in the entire course of study, knowing full well, however, that experience alone would make him proficient in the knowledge he was beginning to acquire.

He made the acquaintance of many of Mike's friends and gained from them much useful information concerning ways and means; but at the same time he let them know that he was interested in the play-ground matter, and that as soon as he had gotten sufficient material together he was going to let the public know why the children had been denied it and how it had been accomplished. In his heart, Mike had trembled at Livingston's avowal of what he intended to do, as well as his blind assumption that to act square would work in that district; but he soon saw that his very audacity had caught the neighborhood, and the mistrust and opposition his coming amongst them had first caused was giving way gradually to the recognition that the man was a leader, and a man who was good for a fight.

Brydon had rather laughed at Livingston's plunge into so notorious a district as the one Mike hailed from, nevertheless he was glad that the work interested him, and he had offered to take part in the row when it had reached an exciting point.

"Preliminary work isn't in my line," he had said jokingly one day. "But when the thing gets hot, let me know and I'll stand by you, old boy. To keep those brats and babies from their share of fresh air and sunshine is a beastly shame, and when you need me, let me know"; and Brydon, like thousands of others, had gone off, realizing that work ought to be done, but realizing also his unreadiness and unwillingness to do it.

For a while it had been kept out of the papers, and then one of them made a scoop, and in flaming headlines announced "One of the Classes at Work for the Masses," and there had followed a long, distorted, sensational article on Livingston's work in Mike's district—who he was, what he was, and finally attributing all sorts of motives as to why he was.

It was this article that made Livingston wrinkle his brows together angrily and then relax them with a short laugh. "It is what every man has to expect in this glorious country of ours," he said when he had finished it. "Freedom we have in abundance, but privacy—none." He leaned back in his chair and lighted

a fresh cigar. He did not mind the distortions of the article except as they related to his private life, but these he did resent, and as he thought of its being read at Spinstervilla his face flamed and then paled into sudden whiteness.

Livingston was no fool. He knew well that his name and money caused him to be a desirable matrimonial possibility, and he put to their credit the many obnoxious little efforts that were being constantly made to draw him back into a circle from which he had been long absent; and he also well understood that his marriage and divorce would be considered by that same circle but a tiresome mistake that was not to be taken seriously.

It was not what that circle thought that interested him, however; but what another, and a very different one, would think when they should read these things so painful to him, and at the thought his heart grew full of bitterness.

He got up after a while and went over to his desk and took from it a paper, and unfolded it carefully. His brow knitted, and he ran his hand through his hair again and again as he read, but he kept on until the last word was finished, then re-read several parts of it; and as he read, the vital energy of the man was as recognizable as the color of his eyes or the shape of his face. Tall and well built, with muscles strong and hard, the breath of the forest, the unrestraint of the life of nature and

with dealing with its forces radiated from him, and the hate of injustice shone in his deepset eyes, and the scorn of weakness betrayed itself in the lines of his well shaped mouth.

He put the paper down carefully and then began to write rapidly. The disturbed look on his face increased as he wrote, and after a moment he hesitated and balanced his pen in his fingers as if undecided what to do. His investigations had by no means been a pleasant undertaking during the past few weeks. He had found out things that put a bad taste in his mouth; but the thing that perplexed him most was his discovery that the block of houses which would have to come down for the playground to be made in Mike's district belonged to an estate which was in the hands of Brydon's partner, Mr. Oliver Parker.

Livingston had never liked Parker. His suavity of manner and thin underlip had always grated on him, and a subtle something which, though indefinable, had always been strong, had long ago convinced him that Parker was a rascal. Up to the present time, however, he had nothing but prejudice, or intuition, to base his conviction upon, and he had never mentioned it to Brydon for the reason that he hated an insinuation even more than a lie, and until he could give proof of his fear he did not want to lessen the latter's confidence in his partner.

With a feeling of relief, Livingston realized that not one dollar of Brydon's money was in

Parker's hands. By a strange provision of his father's will, Brydon's share of the estate had been left in trust until he should reach the age of thirty-five years, but his mother's share had been left in fee-simple, and to-day Livingston had learned that she was the owner of the block of houses which Parker's agent had so actively opposed being torn down. There was something behind all this opposition, and for several weeks past Livingston had been working quietly among certain court records and investigating little rumors which had reached him from unexpected quarters, with the result that he felt it was necessary for Brydon, who was out of town, to return at once, and to-night he was writing him to that effect.

CHAPTER XIII

Livingston finished his letter and rang for Mike to mail it, then left his desk and went over to the window and again looked down upon the street. After a few minutes he drew up a chair and threw himself back in it, and yielded to thoughts that for days and weeks past he had been resolutely struggling to keep from definiteness of form or expression. The struggle was useless, however. Even from the day he had first seen her he had been conscious of the new meaning that had come into life for him, and very steadily had that meaning strengthened and developed during each day that had passed, and he knew now that restraint was no longer possible.

It was for her sake only that he had so controlled his every word and act and almost thought; for her sake he had tried to hide his recognition of her lest he startle her by an avowal for which she was unprepared, and for which she could not give him the answer he must have—but he was not equal to the strain, he could no longer wait. Uncertainty was unendurable, and to-night uncertainty must end.

It had been such a new life—that into which

he had dropped so unexpectedly when he had come back to his old home; and the richness and sweetness and freshness of it all was as the rain of heaven upon a sun-scorched earth, and the days that had passed had been the happiest and yet the most unhappy of his life. They had been very beautiful days. All nature had combined to make them radiant with warmth and sunshine and the melody of birds, and in his heart new melodies had been making also; melodies that were maddeningly uncertain and perilously sweet, and only to Brydon had he mentioned the nature of their song.

Abruptly, one night, he had told Brydon of his love for his cousin, and the look on his face had for a moment whitened his own to his lips. Brydon recovered himself quickly, however, and Livingston's hand had been wrung until it hurt.

"Good luck to you, old boy," he had said cheerily, but the ring in his voice was not the one Livingston had hoped to hear, and he knew that while Brydon would stand by him loyally to the end, the thought of his marriage to Virginia had come in the nature of a shock for which he was little prepared.

"I'm a fool not to have seen it," Brydon had said slowly. "But I never thought you would care to marry, and I'm such a selfish dog that I hoped Virginia wouldn't want to for some time yet. I suppose a fellow always feels like that about his younger sister, and she's been

like mine for years, you know. I would rather put her in your care, however, than in any man's living—you believe that, John?" and Brydon had given him a look that bared his heart. "And yet I almost wish to God that you and she had never met, for it is going to mean trouble for you both. Were it any one but her the past would make little difference," and Brydon's voice was suddenly grave and low; "but it is not easy to uproot the principles and prejudices of inheritance and cultivation, and you will have to be very patient if in the end you would win her. God grant it may all come right, however," and Brydon had wrung his hand again and abruptly left the room.

All this and more Livingston thought over as he sat by his window and smoked in the darkness, and a hesitancy that was most unusual seemed to paralyze his power of decision. That Joyce guessed his secret, that Portia feared it, and Elizabeth knew it, he was quite sure, and only Virginia—Virginia, who had sprung into his heart and twisted its every fibre around her until the strain was almost breaking it—only Virginia was unheeding.

That Portia would not readily consent to his marriage to her sister even if Virginia loved him, he knew full well; but it was not Portia's opposition he feared. Portia was direct, determined, tangible and he could face her objections and fight them, but it was Virginia herself that he most dreaded. Virginia, whose

standards of right and wrong were based upon a spiritual insight that few could understand; whose clear vision had never been clouded by subterfuge, or inconsistency, or expediency; and he feared the look that would come into her eyes when she should come face to face with the ways of a world that were so commonplace to him, so new and strange to her. For a week past he had purposely stayed away from her lest his heart should too suddenly betray itself, but to-night the farce of it all came over him, and as he looked at his watch he hurriedly left the room.

When he reached Spinstervilla, Elizabeth was in her hammock and Portia in her favorite low chair on the veranda, and Virginia on the upper step, and as he sat down by her he inquired for Joyce and threw his hat on a chair some distance off.

For a while they talked together of the unusual heat, of Brydon's return, of Laurie's last letter, and the slight accident to Irving, and then Elizabeth suddenly remembering she had an important letter to write, went in. Very soon she was back, however, to say Joyce's headache was no better and would Portia please tell her what to do for her, and Portia, getting up hurriedly, left Virginia and Livingston alone on the porch.

The latter leaned back against the railing and looked at her gravely. She was pulling a rose to pieces, leaf by leaf, and as the petals fell

upon the steps below she watched the pile grow bigger and whiter, and sighed unconsciously.

"And why the sigh, may I ask," and Livingston picked up a petal and stripped it into shreds.

"It is so like life," and she pointed to the little heap the breeze was scattering.

"As a flower of the field it flourisheth and then passeth away. Is that it? A rose, however, is hardly the proper flower. You should have had a daisy."

"Roses and daisies go the same strange way," she said, smiling slightly. "It matters not which they happen to be when both are dead. I suppose the only thing that really matters is whether the roses smelt sweet, and the daisies did their best."

She brushed the few remaining leaves from her lap and clasped her hands together loosely, but her face was turned from him and he could not see its sudden whiteness. He did not answer her, but his penetrating eyes were searching her relentlessly, and as the clock in the hall struck the hour she started nervously.

"It has such a creepy sound," she said with a queer little laugh, "and always suggests garrets and ghosts and things. I almost wish Joyce had never given it to Portia."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

She stirred uneasily.

"I'm not quite sure I don't. I told you I was very old-fashioned."

He leaned forward.

“Are you too old-fashioned to marry a man that is divorced?”

Had he struck her she could hardly have shrunk back farther.

“Don’t—oh, don’t!” she said as if choking, and she put out her hand to keep back further words. “We were so happy—and now—we have waked up!”

Livingston came over and stood in front of her.

“Come with me down to your old wishing tree,” he said gently; “I have much to tell you, much that you must hear before I can ask you to be my wife, and I cannot wait longer to ask you.”

She hesitated a moment, then, as he took her hands in his, she turned and went with him to her best-loved tree, and late into the night they sat and talked.

The story of his life she already knew, but almost brutally he laid bare that part of it which was most bitter for him to touch upon, and the blame of his marriage he took mercilessly upon himself.

“And your—your wife,” and Virginia’s voice had a queer sound in it, “did she wish you to leave her as you did?”

Livingston laughed harshly.

“I imagine she enjoyed my absence rather more than otherwise, though she affected some indignation at it. At one time she tried to impress me with the fancy that she cared for me, but I was never good at imagining the ex-

istence of a non-existent. It was not in her power to give love, and I had no right to demand what I did not give in return."

"But at first—you surely loved her at first?" and Virginia held her hands rigidly together.

Livingston shook his head.

"No, I haven't even that to my credit. I admired her, for at that time she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, the most perfect specimen of flesh and blood; but she was all body; there was no soul within her."

Virginia shook her head dissentingly.

"Perhaps I am mistaken, but I have always believed there was no woman so weak or so wicked but had a soul somewhere. Perhaps you did not try to find if she had one."

"Perhaps I didn't," and Livingston's voice was full of bitterness. "Soul microbes, however, are not in my line, and you do not know the woman about whom you are speaking. I am very willing to take upon myself the blame of the marriage, but I should have been even more guilty in the sight of God than I already am, had I continued to live with the wife who had married me solely for self-interest, and who was becoming daily more and more intolerable to me."

"Did she get the divorce, or you?"

Virginia's voice sounded far away, and her hands locked and unlocked each other nervously.

"She did," and Livingston began to walk restlessly up and down in front of her. "When

I left her, it was not from sudden impulse. We had had several talks on the subject, talks which are ugly to remember, and then came a scene which decided the matter. She took her pleasures recklessly, and one day, after losing heavily at cards the night before, she came to me for the money to pay the debt, and I refused it. Her income from the dower which had been given her on her marriage was fully sufficient for any folly she cared to indulge in, and she knew well I was opposed, intensely opposed, to her gambling, and still she persisted in it, believing I would meet all obligations. For a while I had done so, but when I finally refused to continue it there was a violent, hideous scene, and I left her, and have never seen her since."

"And did you never hear from her?"

The question was asked almost in a whisper, for Virginia could see that Livingston was quivering under the opening of this old wound, and every word concerning it was cutting into the quick, but still there were some things she must know.

"Yes, I heard from her twice. The first letter was a partial apology and a partial promise, the second was one of bitter denunciation and defiance. I answered neither. That I was to pay the full penalty of my reckless disregard of the one thing that makes marriage lawful, I knew full well when I realized the mistake of it all; and when I left Mrs. Livingston in Paris it was with no expectation of getting a divorce.

I accepted the fact that love and home and happiness were to play no part in my life, and I deserved the barrenness of the future for my folly in the past; and had she not wished it otherwise, I would have continued to be her husband in the eyes of the law, but I would have spent my life where I could breathe free, and breathe something that was not shrivelling and stifling to the heart of a man."

"And she has never married again?"

"I have never heard of it. Her mother has since died, and she spends much of her time traveling, I understand. Part of each year she spends in Paris, where her gowns are made, I believe; that seems to be the one thing on earth that really absorbs her."

Virginia unclasped her hands.

"One would never imagine she was a woman of that sort—she is so beautiful. She is so beautiful that it is hard to believe she is so entirely hopeless as you and Brydon think her."

Livingston stopped his walk.

"Do you know her?" he asked in amazement. "Have you ever seen her?"

Virginia shook her head.

"I have never seen her, but I have seen her picture several times. About a year ago I saw a picture of her in an English magazine, and though I knew nothing about her, I cut it out and put it away because it was so beautiful."

She hesitated a moment as if there was something else she would say, then with a deep

breath got up slowly and leaned slightly against the tree. She tried to speak, but the words died away in a half sob, and she looked at Livingston appealingly.

“Why did she come into my life, and you, and love that I cannot have?” she cried brokenly. And after a silence that Livingston dared not break, continued: “You must go away.” She put out her hands as if to keep him from interrupting her. “You must go away. You must go away—because—I love you.”

By a mighty effort Livingston controlled himself.

“And if you love me, why must I go away?”

She turned to him and held out her hands. They shook slightly, but her voice no longer trembled.

“Love will not come to me but once. It will be yours always, always—but I cannot marry you.” She shivered as if cold, though her eyes did not waver. “I cannot marry you—you are the husband of another woman. You must go away. You must go away.”

She swayed slightly and he caught her in his arms, and the love in him, which had been starving for years, leaped into uncontrol and he almost crushed her in the fierceness of his joy.

“Go away!” he repeated. “Go away! I will not go away! I will stay here until you come to me or until death takes me from you. You cannot make me go away!”

CHAPTER XIV

Portia was waiting as Virginia came up the steps, and when she saw the latter's face with its strange new look upon it, the look almost of her dream, she took her in her arms and kissed her silently again and again. Neither spoke, but each knew that the other understood.

So many times in life words are unwise. To-night was one of them, and though a fierce fear was burning in Portia's heart, she knew it was not the time to show it. She would trust the little sister yet longer, and in silence they separated for the night.

Each went to her room, and as Portia closed her door and locked it, her arms involuntarily outstretched themselves.

"My mother, my mother!" she cried, and there was a ring of agony in her voice; "have I failed to teach your child aright? As you would have done, have I done?"

She dropped upon her knees by the bed and buried her face in her arms, and great, tearless sobs shook her frame convulsively. Relaxed, unstrung, this quiet, reserved and self-controlled woman, whom the world, the world that did not know her, thought cold and proud,

crouched through the long hours of the night; crouched and prayed and suffered as none but the mother-heart of a woman can suffer, even though the experience of motherhood be not hers.

With a passionate love that was almost idolatry, she had lavished upon Virginia the out-giving of a heart that had had thrown back upon itself that which was meant for home and husband and children of her own bearing, and with all the strength of her soul she had tried to be to her as mother and friend, and teacher and guide. She had tried to lead her into paths of high thinking and right living, and to instill in her those principles which make for the betterment and the uplift of humanity, and upon which rests the foundation of the home, the church, and the nation; and now that she was face to face with one of the problems which threaten the very base of these things, she shrank back in terror from the struggle that awaited her.

With Portia there was but one standard, and the preservation of that standard was a matter of supremest importance. That the home should be sacredly guarded, the church revered, and the honor of the nation preserved was the creed of her faith concerning these institutions; and she drew back in strong dissent from the theories of those modern apostles who so lightly rattled the foundation stones upon which the fathers had builded, and which to

her, at least, were sufficiently sure and solid and safe to last through all eternity.

For her there could be no compromise with purity, or faith, or integrity. For her there shone ever the clear white light of conviction, and she followed it bravely; and if at times it caused her pain, she accepted the pain as the price she must pay for her faith—and hid it in her heart.

Joyce called her the Mother Superior, and in one sense the name suited her well. In the world but not of it, she did her duty daily, and kept away from the madding crowd which rushed and crushed and knocked each other down, and then helped them up again, and the bloom of her old illusions had never yet been entirely brushed away.

She had been transplanted from a sheltered home where old-fashioned ideals had been born into her soul from the milk of her mother, and in the new soil she had never taken root. And that she had passed the period of life in which new points of view are easily acquired, she realized with a strange feeling of out-of-jointness with her time, and with a consciousness that by the world at large she would be classed as provincial, and narrow, and entirely out of date. To her each woman was a priestess who was to keep eternally alight the fire of love and purity and truth, and nothing that life could give was great enough for the sacrifice of those things whose altar should be sacredly guarded from unholy offerings.

And yet—and yet—she buried her head still deeper in her arms, and her fingers dug into her hands until they cut the tender flesh. With herself she could be stern and unyielding; but she was afraid, pitifully afraid, that she would be weak where Virginia's happiness was concerned. Would she have to tread her wine-press alone? Could she not go with her through the bruising places? Why had love come to each of them as a tragedy, instead as to other women—a beautiful guest?

Virginia would love this man. She already loved him perhaps. To-night he had told her of his love, as she had known that he would do sooner or later. She had seen from the first the instantaneous gravitation of each to the other, and she had shrunk from this night as a woman shrinks from the day of her travail.

Virginia must not marry this man. In the eyes of God, in the eyes of all who believe in the sacredness of marriage, he was the husband of another woman. The law had disannulled this relationship, and he was a free man in the eyes of the law, but deeper than law, and stronger and more powerful, were the vows that had been broken; and if not to each other, at least to the institution into which they had entered, they were still bound by the law that is written in the heart and the conscience of man.

The night grew chill, and still she knelt and suffered as if this cup had been hers to drink. Better far could she have drained it had it been

hers alone. She was used to sorrow and pain, and disappointment and sacrifice. They were old comrades with whom she had often walked hand in hand, and she knew them well, and she was not now afraid of a lonely way. But Virginia! Virginia was meant for sunshine and gladness and the fragrance of flowers, and not to fight the problems of life, nor to face its issues; and yet in the mockery of fate this thing had come upon her.

She lifted her head at last and her eyes fell upon the face of the Sistine Madonna—that mother-face of all humanity—and tears came suddenly as a relief to the tense strain of the night.

“O Mary, mother of Christ!” she whispered, “if I had been taught to pray to you, I should pray to you to-night. Only a woman can understand—only a woman can know how weak is the heart of another woman where love is deep!”

She held out her hands yearningly to the picture, then dropped them quickly, and again buried her face in her arms. She tried to pray, but she could not. She was worn and spent, and over and over in her ears sounded the words, now clearly, now confusedly, now clearly again, “whosoever shall put away his wife and marry another, committeth adultery against her,” and as the words burnt into her brain she shrank back from their meaning as flesh shrivels under the touch of fire.

CHAPTER XV

When Virginia went to her room she, too, shut her door and locked it, something she had never done before in her life. She walked over to the windows and opened wide their shutters, then sat down by one of them and let the wind blow upon her face; and with eyes that saw not, looked out into the darkness of the night.

At first she was not conscious of any acute sensation. All emotion, all responsibility, all decision was suspended, and like one curiously numb, she seemed to be reviewing impersonally a strange something that had happened, a something that was beautiful and terrible, and that was to change sharply and suddenly the peaceful current of her life.

She did not pretend to be surprised at what Livingston had told her. In an intangible, elusive, delicious sort of way the first stirrings of love which had filled her heart during these days that were past had been vaguely understood, and she had known before to-night that he loved her, but not until to-night had she faced the truth or let herself dream of what it was going to mean.

She had told him that she loved him. Great God—how she loved him! She unfastened

her dress at the throat and threw the ribbon on the floor, and leaned still farther out of the window that she might breathe better. It had not occurred to her to keep back the confession of her love; she was too transparent to attempt subterfuge or to deny what existed, and how there could be hesitation or doubt in a matter of this kind she did not at all understand. One must either love or not love, and there was no uncertainty in her heart as to its presence there.

She leaned her head against the sash of the window and her eyes grew clear and dry. It had been too beautiful to last, those dear delicious days which to-night had made seem such a long, long time ago, and she had known that it must end, that subtle electric something which points to a new heaven and a new earth; but she had thrilled to its every whisper and had refused to give it a name or a meaning, and the facing of it to-night had been a sharp and sudden shock.

He had made no sign, had said no word, but she had known, and she had foolishly dreamed that awakening need not come. Could she have prevented his loving her?

For the first time she smiled queerly, and in the darkness shook her head. He was not a man who dealt in preventives. The thought chilled her with a sudden fear. Would he conquer her in the end; so dominate her that she would yield her will to his, would marry him after all? Why had he loved her? Why not

some one else who did not think about such things as she and Portia did? She and Portia were so old-fashioned, so out of date, with their queer ideas about old standards of right and wrong; and principles that must never be sacrificed; and ideals that must ever be sustained. They were not broad and liberal and advanced as it was the custom of the day to be; they believed in the finality of moral law, and their opinion on the subject of marriage would be laughed at by some, and pitied by others, and agreed with by but few.

Other women married divorced men, and men married divorced women, and the world went carelessly on. Did such things matter? Did anything matter save to be happy while one might? Life was so short, so short. Why should she and happiness part company so early on the way?

And Livingston—had she the right to keep happiness from him? Her heart contracted sharply. He had so much that men envied and women wanted, and yet all that he most cared for had long been denied him.

The thought seemed to stifle her, and she got up as if to breathe better, then turning from the window walked over to her desk, unlocked a small drawer and took from it a picture. She turned on the light and looked at it long and earnestly, then with a half shudder put it back and cut off the light.

Was fate a wizard who mixed up people's lives and tossed human hearts about like loose

leaves? Why had this woman come into her quiet life? Why had she kept through all these months her picture hidden in her desk? When Brydon had told them the story of Livingston's marriage and mentioned the name of his wife, she remembered with an indefinable little thrill that her picture was in her possession. Since then she had never looked at it, and yet she could not make up her mind to destroy it. Should she do so to-night? Had she a right to keep it?

In the darkness the pictured face seemed to stand out in clear relief, and with a feeling of almost terror she threw herself face downwards on the bed as if to hide it from her sight. She covered her eyes with her hands, but her ears were full of a dull monotone that would not be hushed, and after a while she recognized it as a fragment of the wedding ceremony. Over and over again it repeated itself: "Is not by any—to be taken—in hand—unadvisedly,—but rève'rently—discreetly—and in the fear of God."

She covered her ears with her hands and buried her face still deeper in the pillow, but like a monotonous dirge the words continued, and then suddenly they changed to a more solemn tone:

"I require—and charge you both,—as ye will answer—at the dreadful—day of judgment,—when the secrets—of all hearts—shall be disclosed,—that if either—of you do know—any

impediment—why ye may not be—lawfully—joined together—in matrimony,—ye do now confess it;—for be ye—well assured,—that so many—as are coupled together—otherwise than as God’s word—doth allow,—are not joined together by God,—neither is their matrimony—lawful.”

She shuddered as the words one by one came into meaning, and bit her teeth into her lips to keep back the cry of her heart.

Could the church marry her with that for a part of its service? Why did the church have a service that it mocked by ignoring? Could she be a law unto herself? She wasn’t a new woman who laughed at old laws and lived in defiance of them. She was just a woman who craved love and gave it richly in return; but love must be pure and holy and white, or else it was not love—it was something else.

Why had Margaret Grey not married again? Could she have any scruples on the subject?

Virginia shook her head. Margaret Grey did not belong to the class whose consciences were most acute. Only primitive people were still sensitive to the social evolutions of advanced civilization, and Elizabeth said fashionable people interpreted laws to suit themselves, not themselves to suit laws.

Was Elizabeth right? Were fashionable people different from other people, or only a little more conspicuous? They had more pleasure—that is, more means of pleasure—

than many others, but did they have less trouble or pain, or death or disgrace, or sickness or sorrow?

The night seemed interminable. Through the window Virginia watched its darkness mysteriously passing into the pallor that foretells the coming of another day; the pallor that seems to emanate from nowhere and to diffuse itself everywhere before it definitely declares itself and is dissipated by the breaking through of a stronger light; and as she watched it she prayed dumbly. If only light would come to her. Portia could not lead her to it or bring it to her; nothing human could. It must come as did the dawn, from that mystical fountain-head in whose holding is all life and all law, be it natural, or spiritual, or moral; and at the thought she shivered with cold, and her hand touching her dress, found it damp and clinging.

During the night the air had grown chill, and for hours the wind had been blowing on her. She got up and closed the window and noticed that it was raining, then went over to the door and unlocked it softly. Perhaps if she could sleep she might wake and believe the night had been a hideous dream. She took off her dress and put on her gown, and again threw herself upon the bed, and pressed her hands tightly over her throbbing eyes.

If only she could sleep! Things looked so hopeless, so impossible in the still hours of the night when all the world is sleeping and you

alone awake; but in the sunlight cowardice becomes courage, and despair, hope, and difficulties melt away; perhaps to-morrow it would be so with her. Would to-morrow ever come? If only she could sleep—sleep—sleep!

The rain began to beat more heavily on the roof. It was chanting a strange melody. She lifted her head to listen, then dropped it again and pressed her hands over her ears to shut out the sound. Like a weird cadence the words rose and fell to the accompaniment of the wind: "Wilt thou love her,—comfort her,—honor and keep her,—in sickness and in health;—and forsaking all others,—keep thee only—unto her—so long—as ye both—shall live?"

She dug her face into her pillow and her breath came unsteadily, and as if she were choking. Surely she was exaggerating the sacredness of these words. They were not meant to be taken literally unless things went happily. To-morrow they would sound differently. It had come so suddenly upon her to-night that her power to think properly was dulled. She was morbid perhaps; to-morrow she would see it in another light.

Could she give him up? Great God! She threw back her head suddenly as if suffocating. No—she could not give him up! All the love of her life had been saved for him, and she had known him from the first. Joyce could not love Brydon as she loved, or she would not hesitate were all the world in the way.

The memory of his passionate kisses sent the hot blood quiveringly over her body, and for a moment a great joy filled her heart.

He loved her with a love surpassing even her own; for hers, as yet, was but the partial surrender of the woman who holds in reserve its full completeness until she be entirely his—but the vital currents of his soul had been stirred, and she had stirred them.

Whatever else life denied her, it would ever have a memory that was worth suffering for. The experience of a deep love given and returned would always be hers, and she thanked God that she had sounded its depth, even though its height be never reached.

It was so easy for people who did not know love, or only knew its placid, passionless acceptance, to tell other people what was right or wrong; so easy to preach, so hard to practice eternal principles.

Would it help her to know what other people thought about such things? She shook her head. Not even Portia could help her in this. She must fight it out for herself; fight it with no one to help.

If only she could sleep!

The wind was rising steadily, and the branches of the trees bent and shook and rattled their leaves angrily. The rain was even more relentless, and in great gusts it beat against the house and poured itself in little rivulets from the roof. Suddenly it seemed to

stop and the silence was oppressive, then it began again. It was singing now, and the melody was deep and rich and tender: "I, Jonathan,—take thee, Virginia." No,—not Virginia—not Virginia! "I, Jonathan,—take thee, Margaret,—to be my wedded wife,—to have and to hold,—from this day forward,—for better,—for worse;—for richer,—for poorer;—in sickness and in health,—and hereto—I plight thee—my troth."

In the darkness she shuddered. "God have mercy, have mercy upon me!" she whispered wearily. "Have mercy upon me, and incline mine heart to keep thy law."

CHAPTER XVI

For several hours after he left Virginia, Livingston rode his horse hard and fast, and when finally he turned him over to the stable boy, who was sleepily waiting, it was only because the rain was coming down too heavily to stay out longer. He would like to have stayed out longer in the night; stayed out until his pulse should beat less rapidly, and his blood run less hotly through his heart and brain, but in the rain it was folly, and moreover he must write to Portia at once.

Virginia loved him! Nothing else on earth mattered—Virginia loved him!

The horse's hoofs had beat the measure of the words in a clear, ringing rhythm; the night winds had chorused it, and his own heart had re-echoed it in a passionate tumult of exultation—Virginia loved him! Nothing else mattered, Virginia loved him!

He went into his library and sat down at his desk and drew toward him pen and paper, and began to write. It had seemed an easy thing to do, but after a moment he hesitated and his brow knitted frowningly. What should he say to Portia? He could not ask her consent

to marry Virginia if Virginia would not marry him. He tore up the first sheet and began on another, and without waiting to read what he had written, he sealed the letter and laid it on the table to be sent over in the morning.

The dawn was breaking when he put up his pen, and as he threw himself back in his chair the strain and exultation of the first part of the night gave way to a reaction that chilled him with a sudden fear.

The grayness of the room became oppressive, and as he opened a window to let in more light and air he saw a young bird on the ground below, that had evidently been bruised and beaten by the storm of the night. Its poor little wings were helpless, and piteously it was chirping a feeble cry. The other birds had left it, however; left it to its fate, and as Livingston went out and picked it up and warmed its little body with his hands, it fluttered faintly for a moment before it died. He put it back gently and covered it with some leaves and soft earth.

"Broken things are better dead," he said with a tinge of bitterness; "broken promises, broken purposes, broken laws, or broken lives. You are lucky, little bird, to have the struggle ended so quickly."

With an unconscious sigh that was half sorrowful, half cynical, he went into the library and again lay back in his chair. Sleep was impossible, and the memory of an old legend came into his mind with persistent irrita-

tion. The eternal punishment of the man who, parched with thirst, stood always up to his throat in water which continually rose almost to his lips but never reached them, and to drink which he could not stoop or bend his head, mocked him with its hopelessness and despair. The thought was maddening, for he knew the awfulness of thirst as only those can who have felt it in deserts where water is not found; but a more consuming thirst was upon him tonight—the thirst for that which a man has a right to ask of life; for that which seemed so near him but which might be as unattainable as the stars of heaven.

He would be patient. He was not as tolerant of other people's points of view as he should be; but, God help him, he would be very patient with Virginia and win her by his love at last.

He would not attempt to urge her too strongly at first; he would not force her to the issue of a decision until she was more ready for it, but in the end she should be his wife, for she loved him, and love was more powerful than law, and most persuasive of all arguments.

He looked around the room and his face flushed at the thought of her presence in it. It was a handsome room and full of those things which make a house characteristic, but the spirit of a woman was not there, and its cheerlessness chilled him as never before.

She would sit there and he would read to her in the winter evenings while the firelight

played over her gown and deepened the delicate color of her face; or over there in the next room she would take him out of this present world into that mystical one of the spirit by the spell of her wonderful song, for hers was the voice of an angel, and the heart strings of her hearers was the harp upon which she played.

Would life give him this? Or would the happiness he craved be as the unreachable waters to the famished man? Would he be patient? Could he wait patiently until she came to him freely?

He got up and began to walk restlessly up and down the room. Was life to mean for him, after all, that which he had put so resolutely behind him? It could be so beautiful a thing, this little while called life—so beautiful or so bitter. Which was it going to be for him?

Faith had been long dormant and hope long dead, but love had kindled both into life again, and to-night his heart was full of a wordless prayer. Which would it be—which would it be?

CHAPTER XVII

Joyce came in, as usual, a little late for breakfast.

"It was the rain and darkness," she said, nodding good-morning as she took her seat. "Or was it my headache? It's a dreadful thing to have to make an excuse every morning for being late. Have you said grace, Portia?"

The latter nodded.

"I hope your headache is better, dear; in fact I think you must have turned it over to me," and Portia smiled faintly.

"I hope I didn't do anything of the kind," Joyce answered quickly, "though you do look pretty ghostly. Let me get you some of the medicine I took last night," and she started to leave her seat.

Portia motioned her to stop.

"I do not want any medicine—the coffee is all that is necessary."

She broke open a letter which she had found at her plate, and began to read, and as she did so the pallor in her face turned to a purplish crimson which flooded her very temples. Her teeth pressed her under lip between them as if to keep back something that would out, and

her hands shook unsteadily. She finished the letter, however, but made no comment, then as the flush died out slowly from her face she handed it to Elizabeth and left the room.

Joyce looked up curiously.

"What is the matter?" she asked; "what has happened?"

"Something we helped to happen, I guess," answered Elizabeth. "It had to happen, and I suppose it is better to have it over. I saw last night that he was going to wait no longer, and so I came in and called Portia to you and gave him a chance."

Joyce still did not understand.

"What are you talking about? Gave who a chance? And to do what? Who wasn't going to wait any longer?" And she sat suddenly upright in her chair.

"Are you putting this on?" asked Elizabeth, still holding the letter in her hand. "I have heard love was blind, but I thought it applied only to one's own case." There was pretended scorn in her voice, and she looked at Joyce indignantly. "You don't mean to say that you didn't know this had to come."

"That what had to come?"

"Didn't you know Mr. Livingston was here last night? The first time for a week."

Joyce dropped the glass she was about to put to her lips, and the spilt water ran unnoticed in her lap.

"You mean—?"

“Yes, I mean,” and Elizabeth, whose voice was the slightest bit unsteady, scanned the letter again and handed it to her. The latter looked at it uneasily, and read it aloud slowly.

“‘MY DEAR PORTIA :

“‘Last night I asked Virginia to be my wife, and told her of my love. I did not ask your consent to do this, for I should have done it whether you gave it or not; but, in God’s name, I ask you not to withhold it. I recognize all that she is to you and all that you are to her, and if you will let me come and talk to you concerning this more fully than I can write, I will be eternally grateful.

“‘Faithfully,

“‘JONATHAN LIVINGSTON.

“‘Hampstead, 4.30 A. M.’”

Joyce dropped the note in her plate as if it stung her hand, and her face went deathly white.

“Well,” said Elizabeth a little nervously; “well, why don’t you say something?”

Joyce looked at her as if unseeing, then she pushed her plate away and rose quickly from the table and went over to the window. She opened it for a minute and let the rain beat in on her face, but still said nothing. Presently she turned away and came back slowly to the table, and her eyes were full of tears.

“Oh, if only it had not come,” she said brokenly; “if only it had not come! I have seen it from the first,” she went on after a moment of painful silence, “and have dreaded it so—for she loves him, Elizabeth. Even before she knew it herself, I have known it—and she cannot marry him,”—her voice died away in a half shudder, and she looked at Elizabeth appealingly,—“she cannot marry him!”

“Why not?” replied the latter, trying to speak indifferently. “His former marriage does not mean an unpardonable offense, even in the eyes of the most scrupulous. Is he to be denied all the joy and happiness of life because of a hateful mistake he made when barely more than a boy? We have gotten into the habit of taking life too seriously—we old maids. We’ve been reared with views—a very bad thing to be reared with. If I had offspring I would let them grow up like turnips. I would implant nothing in them that they couldn’t later get rid of, for instilled principles are apt to become distilled disturbers later in life. It’s a painful mistake to have too much conscience,” and Elizabeth pushed Joyce in a low chair near the table and gave her a shake.

“But you,” persisted Joyce miserably; “would you marry a divorced man?”

“It depends upon circumstances. One never knows what one would do until one is forced to a decision.”

“But certain principles are fundamental and final, and one does not have to be tested to

know how one stands concerning them. Isn't that true?"

Elizabeth laughed queerly.

"The first part, yes; but I am not so sure about the other. We think we are very honest with our pretty theories and convictions, but when they become a personal matter we're apt to see them in another light." Her voice changed suddenly. "Heaven knows my heart aches for Virginia. She has an awful question to decide, and one in which none of us can help her."

She stopped abruptly and walked over to the window and stood for a moment looking out. The rain was falling steadily, and in great sheets beat against the panes of glass and spattered the dripping branches of the trees, which bent and shook in the rising wind. There was no sign of clearing in the heavily-clouded sky, and as she swept it anxiously with her eyes her heart seemed hardly less leadened than its color. She was angry with herself that it should be so and she shrugged her shoulders impatiently, and turning saw Joyce was by her side.

"Is Virginia sick this morning that she has not been to breakfast?"

The genuine distress in Joyce's voice made Elizabeth pull herself together quickly.

"I hardly think she is sick," she said cheerfully; "there is no reason why she should be. Suppose, however, we go and find out."

As they started to leave the room, Portia re-entered it. All trace of her sudden agitation

was gone, and her usual quiet and gentle manner was again evident. Her face was white, however, and there was an anxious look upon it, but they saw at once it was from a different cause from the one they had been discussing.

“Virginia is asleep,” she said, coming back to her seat at the table, “and I don’t like to wake her, but I have never known her to do this before. Her face is very much flushed and her breathing sounds peculiar. I am afraid she is sick.”

There was no disguising the anxiety in her voice, and Joyce dropped her handkerchief nervously on the floor.

“Let me go tip-toe in and see,” and she tried to speak naturally. “She is always scolding me for being lazy,” and she started to leave the room.

“No, let me go—you’ll wake her up by staring at her, Joyce,” and Elizabeth pushed the latter back into her chair.

Portia laid a hand on an arm of each.

“Wait a moment,” she said gently. “You have read the letter that I gave you. I gave it to you, for you should know, as my girls have a right to know, all that concerns each other; but no word of this has passed between Virginia and myself, and until it does I think you will understand very well that I cannot talk about it, even to you. She would keep back nothing from you, but neither would she talk often of so personal a matter, and until she de-

cides for herself, and until she asks us about them, I think it would be best, perhaps, for us to keep to ourselves our opinions concerning the question she has to decide." Her voice broke and she bit her lip sharply.

Splendid, brave Portia! She had conquered so much in life, but not until the night before had she really conquered herself. Firm and unyielding as granite were her own convictions, but she would not force them on another, not even on the little sister whose keeping had been hers since the day of her birth, well nigh. She was a woman now, this little sister. A woman who must choose her own path and make her own place in life, and she must choose it for herself.

The struggle of the night had been sharp and bitter, but Portia had seen at last that it was not required of her to force her convictions on the conscience of another, and Elizabeth, who understood, as Joyce did not, how hard had been the fight to reach such a decision and to gain such a victory over her own will, felt her throat grow hot and tight, and without waiting to hear more left the room quickly. When she came back there was a sober look on her face that was unusual.

"Virginia is awake and insists upon getting up," she said, trying to speak carelessly, "but I don't think she ought to. She has taken cold somehow, and I am going to fix something for her throat, and while I am doing it I wish

you'd go and tell her to behave herself and stay in bed all day."

Portia and Joyce were both out of the room before Elizabeth had finished, and together they ran up the steps. Virginia was sitting up in bed with her hands clasped around her knees, and her hair falling in loose curls down her back, and they understood at once the look on Elizabeth's face.

"I'm as hoarse as a frog," she said in a whisper, though trying to laugh it off. "I think I took cold last night. I forgot the shutters were open and the rain has nearly ruined the matting. Don't look at me like that, Joyce; I'm not dead. I'll be all right to-morrow."

Joyce did not answer, but looked at Virginia staringly. A brilliant color was in the latter's cheeks, and her eyes were bright and shining, but there was a drawn look about the mouth that cut Joyce to the heart. Portia went over to the bed and put her cool hands on Virginia's flushed face.

"You have taken cold, dearie," she said gently, giving her the usual morning kiss; "and you must stay in bed all day, and, as Elizabeth says, behave yourself, so that you'll be all right to-morrow. Brydon may be back to-morrow, you know."

Virginia lay back as if suddenly faint. Portia's voice was bright and cheerful, and the distress that she had dreaded to hear was nowhere evident.

Could she know—did Joyce know—and Elizabeth? It seemed a long time ago, and she was very tired. There was a pain in her side that came and went curiously, and a great weight seemed to be upon her chest. She would talk to them after a while, after the weight lifted—and Portia need not worry.

She tried to say something to Joyce, but the whisper was so low that Joyce had to stoop over in order to hear it, and as she did so she hugged her to her heart, and without answering ran out of the room.

Virginia looked inquiringly at Portia.

“What is the matter with Joyce?” and she made an effort to speak louder. “One would think I was going to die because I can’t talk very well.”

“She is not used to seeing you sick,” and Portia smiled bravely. “Is there a pain in your side, darling, that you put your hand there now and then? Show me where it is,” and Portia knelt by the bed and took Virginia’s hand in hers, while her heart contracted with a horrible fear.

“It isn’t much,” said Virginia, as usual making little of pain. “It just comes and goes.” She caught her breath sharply and gripped Portia’s hand until it hurt. “That one was pretty bad, but they don’t last long. I will be all right presently, so don’t bother. I think I would like to go to sleep if I can. I did not sleep very well last night,” and she looked at Portia beseechingly.

The latter slipped one arm under her head and with the other drew her tightly to her heart.

“I know you did not, little sister, and I know why. I know all about it, and when the pain is gone and the hoarseness is better we will talk it over, and whatever will make you happiest, whatever you think best to do, I will agree to, and now you must sleep.”

Portia's eyes were full of tears, but Virginia's were dry and searching, and she looked at Portia with a strange questioning in them.

“Do you think God cares that I suffer in trying to find out what is right?” she asked in a whisper. “Do you think He cares?”

Portia nodded, but for a moment did not speak.

“I think He not only cares, but that sometimes He needs us, little sister, almost as much as we need Him—needs us to help Him do His part.”

A sharp pain made Virginia gasp again, and she lay back on her pillow, with teeth clenched, to keep Portia from seeing it.

“I do not know,” she said wearily. “I only know that I want to do what is right. I am willing to suffer for what is right, but not for foolish morbidness. Sometimes one becomes over-conscientious and cannot discriminate. I should not like to do that, and yet it is very dark—and it is so easy to stumble in the dark.”

She closed her eyes and shivered slightly, and Portia, getting up from her knees, covered her up warmly.

She was genuinely alarmed now, and going out into the hall, went over to the 'phone.

"I have sent for the doctor, if that is what you want, Portia," called Elizabeth, coming out of the dining-room with something smoking hot on a tray. "Virginia will be all right in the morning, but it won't do any harm to let him see her to-day. Please come down here and do something to Joyce. She is all to pieces and I can do nothing with her. A person can't even have a cold these days," she went on grumblingly, "without somebody getting excited over it. I wish to Heaven every man on earth was at the bottom of the Dead Sea, and with a stone tied to him, too!"

CHAPTER XVIII

The rain beat pitilessly on the roof, and made a ceaseless assault on the window panes, as if to test their power of resistance. Out on the lawn the trees bent and shook under the sweep of the wind, and the vines and flowers yielded unresistingly to the attack upon them, and lay dragged and battered on the soaked earth and dripping grass. The clouds hung low and heavy in the sky, and with the earth and air radiated a grayness and dreariness that was penetrating and depressing, and as powerful as a superstition of childhood.

Although the last day of June, a log fire was burning in the hall at Spinstervilla, and close to it, down on the rug with her knees drawn up between her tightly-clasped hands, Joyce was sitting in silent wretchedness and miserable misgivings.

Virginia was ill—Virginia was ill! The light of the house had gone suddenly out, and a great stillness was upon it. Virginia was ill. All day the words had been sounding in her ears and hammering at her heart, and as twilight came on the strain was becoming unbearable.

Something she had read once, a list of dreary things, had persistently repeated itself over and over in her mind, and to get rid of its monotone was impossible. "A nursery when the child has died"; a "grate when the fire is dead"—that was how it had seemed all day, and would seem until Virginia was well again. The doctor had looked grave when he came out of the room, and she had heard him tell Portia he would come late in the afternoon, and for the last hour she had listened to each tick of the clock and hoped each minute to hear him ride up.

The wind blew a sudden gust of rain against the window pane and the branch of a tree tapped lightly upon it, and jumping up nervously she saw the doctor entering the hall at last.

"I am so thankful you have come," she said, trying to speak calmly. "You can go right up, they are waiting," and she led the way to Virginia's door.

Outside she waited miserably, but his visit was long, alarmingly long. What if she should be worse? If so she would 'phone over to Hampstead for Livingston at once. He had a right to know; moreover, they knew little about this doctor—he might be very good, he might not, but Livingston would know what to do.

The doctor came out after a while, followed by Elizabeth, and his face looked even graver than in the morning, and at sight of it Joyce's

voice died away in her throat as she tried to ask if there had been any change during the day. Elizabeth followed him to the door and went outside with him, and as Joyce heard her close it behind her she knew what it meant—knew that Elizabeth wanted to say something, to ask something she did not wish her to hear, and her heart contracted with a suffocating fear. She was ashamed of herself, terribly ashamed that she should be so unnerved at the possibility of Virginia's being very ill; but unnerved she was. To-morrow she would be braver—to-day she had been as a terror-stricken child.

Elizabeth came in from the porch, and her face looked suddenly drawn and haggard, but there was no flinching in her eyes and her voice was quiet when she spoke.

“Is it because you have seen it before that you thought it was what the doctor fears it is going to be?” she asked gravely. “Is that what has been the matter all day, dear?”

Joyce bent her head, and then she fell into a sudden sobbing that shook her whole frame, and Elizabeth, alarmed at her loss of control, took her in her arms and soothed her as if she were a little child. After a while the sobbing grew less and less and the tension of the day relaxed a little as Joyce unburdened her heart of the fear that had filled it since she had seen Virginia's face that morning and had heard the sharp indrawing breath and realized the acuteness of the pain with which she suffered.

“Twice before I have seen it—once when mother died and again when Claudia was taken,” she whispered quiveringly. “And oh, Elizabeth, you do not know—you do not know what it means to give up those you love the best! Yours who were dearest died when you were too little to understand. You do not know, you do not know,” and her voice died away in a gasping sob.

“There are bitterer ways of giving up than death,” Elizabeth answered slowly, and the pain in her voice was a note that Joyce had never heard before. “But we must be brave, dear, you and I, for Portia’s sake. The doctor fears pneumonia, though as yet it has not developed. Every breath must be watched, however, and nothing taken for granted—and now I must go back to her.”

She gave Joyce a swift, tender kiss, and hurried up the steps to Virginia’s room, and Joyce, waiting until she was well in it, went over to the ’phone and called up Livingston.

“Come over at once. Virginia is ill,” was all she said, and then dropped the receiver as if afraid of what she had done.

The rain was still falling, but the wind had quieted slightly, and through the darkness Joyce peered for some sign of clearing weather for the morrow, but seeing none she walked restlessly from room to room, and finally came back to the fire and held her hands out to its cheerful blaze. The warmth was grateful, and

as she stood there she heard a sound, and turning saw Livingston in front of her. His face was set and the grip of his hand hurt badly.

"What is it?" he asked. "For God's sake don't make me wait."

Joyce shook her head and tried to speak, but words would not come. Then turning she saw Brydon, and with a sob of joy and thankfulness she reached out her hands and he gathered her in his arms and held her tightly there.

Livingston turned away, but in a moment Joyce was by him again.

"I did not mean to frighten you—to frighten you," she repeated; "but I knew you would want to know. Virginia has been ill all day. She has not been very well for several days, and last night the wind blew on her for hours and she did not know how cold it had turned or how it was blowing until the harm had been done. The doctor says it is laryngitis and something else, and he fears pneumonia. She may be much better to-morrow, but I thought you would like to know."

Her voice was almost pleading, and Livingston, bending over, kissed her hands in silence.

"Who is the doctor?" he asked presently. "Who did you say had been called in?"

"Dr. Sommers, the one in the village. Is he all right?"

Livingston's brow wrinkled slightly.

"I do not know, but I am afraid not. Do you suppose I can see Portia? Or rather, I

must see her. Will you please tell her I would like to see her as soon as possible?"

"She has not left Virginia to-day," Joyce answered hesitatingly. "She does not know I sent for you. She may not like it, but"—and she turned to Brydon helplessly—"I should have wanted you to have known."

Brydon's eyes grew blurred—Virginia's illness would bring him Joyce at last.

"I will tell her for you, John," he said quietly, "and she will think as we do that Joyce was right to let you know at once."

For a moment Joyce and Livingston stood facing each other, with hearts as bared as leafless trees, and then the latter held out his hands again.

"I can never thank you enough," he said simply. "Virginia is mine and I have a right to know."

He turned away and began to walk restlessly up and down the hall. The clock ticked monotonously and the silence grew oppressive, and Joyce, seeing Portia coming, slipped noiselessly away and left them alone.

For a moment they faced each other in silence and then Livingston spoke.

"This is no time for form or folly, Portia," he said quietly, "and no chances are to be taken. I have asked Virginia to be my wife and she has told me that she loves me, and on that confession I base my claim in sharing your care of her now. You will let me go to her should she

get worse—you must not keep me away. Once I looked into medicine and through interest in the subject have kept up some study of it ever since. I'm no doctor, but I know how to watch a thing of this kind and it's the nursing that is most important. Hunt must come out. I'll wire him to-night, if you think best, and if he says she is really ill you must not keep me away."

He spoke rapidly, as if afraid Portia would stop him, but the latter merely nodded assent and turned to leave without speaking.

"Have you no word for me, Portia; have you nothing to say to me at all?"

His voice was almost bitter, and as if wrung from his heart, and turning she held out her hand slowly.

"If Virginia wishes to see you I will send for you," she said mechanically. "I must go back to her now. Good-night."

The next day brought the doctor from the city, and Joyce's fear proved only too true. An acute case of pneumonia had developed rapidly, and with it were complications that were serious.

"I will come every day," he said gravely, "but I can only come once and she needs closer attention than that. This Sommers is a fair doctor, but you know this trouble pretty well, Livingston, and if to-morrow there is no change you'd better look into it yourself. Did you say Miss Deming was a relative of yours?"

Livingston shook his head.

“Some day I hope she will be my wife,” he said quietly, holding out his hand as the train came in sight. “Will you be out at the same hour to-morrow?”

Hunt nodded and shook the offered hand silently, and before the train started he saw Livingston's horses being driven rapidly up the hill from the little station to which he and Brydon had brought him.

Both Portia and Elizabeth bitterly objected to having a nurse sent out from the city. “We would be put aside,” they had declared, and they were not willing to trust Virginia to the care of a professional who would probably not consent to their assuming any of the responsibility of nursing her, and though Livingston thought they were wrong, he could say nothing, and in silent helplessness he watched the day go by.

In the early dawn of the third morning Elizabeth came to him and told him of Virginia's increasing fever and strange delirium, and he waited no longer, but went to her at once. She did not know him, but looked at him with wide-open eyes, and then held out her hand as if to speak to a stranger. He took it, and with his cool ones smoothed it gently and yet more gently while he returned her restless gaze steadily, and gradually the eyelids flickered and then suddenly lifted and flickered again, until finally there was a short sleep that was sorely needed.

As long as it lasted Livingston sat in the same position, holding her hand and softly

smoothing it; but when she roused and the old restlessness came back he got up and began to mix a preparation that the doctor had left for her to take. Stooping over he slipped his arm under her head and with his other hand held the glass to her lips. She looked at him oddly and then almost knocked the glass out of his hand.

"I don't like it and it's not your business to make me take it," and she tried to get away from him.

"You must drink it," he said firmly. "Quick—drink quick and let me put the glass away."

She looked at him doubtfully, then drained its contents, and this time knocked the empty glass out of his hand upon the bed.

"I will not take any more, but you need not go away. Perhaps you can lift it off. It is very heavy," and she looked at him appealingly.

"What is it that is heavy?" he asked, slipping down on his knees beside the bed that he might better catch her gasping words. "What is it that is heavy, and where must I lift it off?"

Already she was wandering off to something else, however, and her eyes were now on Livingston and now on Portia, and their brilliant blankness was full of restless questioning as she looked from one to the other; and the silence of the room was unbroken save for her labored breath.

The minutes crawled by slowly, and Livingston, whose ear caught every sound and whose

eye missed no flush or change of expression, and whose fingers were almost constantly on Virginia's pulse, sat motionless with white, set face and stern, determined lines about his mouth.

Virginia was ill, desperately ill; but he had fought death before and he would fight it now to the bitter end. He thanked God that Brydon was here. He had gotten back before the receipt of his letter regarding Parker, but there had been no time to discuss the subject-matter in it or even to mention it to him, for there was but one thought now, and all else in the world was as nothing beside it. Portia had stood up bravely through the shock of this sudden illness, but she was unapproachable in her suffering, and outside of Virginia's room she was white and silent; and though he knew well that she disapproved of his presence in the sick room, it did not matter. If all heaven and all earth had disapproved he would still have gone in.

The soft gray dawn gave way gradually to a rosy glow that crept through the blinds, and Elizabeth turned them quietly to keep out the warm flush of radiant sunlight that presently threatened to flood the room.

Outside the birds twittered and jabbered and sang little snatches of song and greeting to each other, and the fragrance of fresh flowers was wafted faintly in. It was a July morning, warm and rich and glorious in color and per-

fume and splendor, and the storm of a few days before had but freshened the earth for a renewed outburst of giving, and all nature seemed aglow with vigor and beauty and the joy of living.

The day was Sunday, and in the village the chimes were ringing their message of hope and peace, and through the distance they sounded sweet and soft and low. Virginia heard them and tried to raise her head to listen better, then she put her hand to her throat piteously.

“If you do not take it away, I cannot sing,” she whispered hoarsely. “They will wait for me and I cannot sing. Will you not take it away?” and she turned again to Livingston with eyes that were pleading with pain.

Portia buried her face in her hands, but made no sound, and Elizabeth went over to the window and closed it sharply. The sunshine was unbearable. They were fighting death—and sunshine and flowers and the singing of birds belonged to life. To-day they were a mockery.

CHAPTER XIX

The days dragged wretchedly away, and through the long hours of each, with only short intervals of absence, Livingston sat by Virginia's bed and watched each breath and noted every sign.

On the seventh day the doctor told them by night there would be a change. Virginia would be better—or—

Joyce did not wait to hear more, but quivering with a terror that could not be controlled she had gone out of the house and hidden herself away from them all, even from Brydon, that she might lessen for a few minutes, at least, the tension of the terrible strain which was hourly threatening to be more than she could endure.

Through the weary hours Livingston watched unflinchingly, however, and toward evening Virginia, worn and spent from her ceaseless tossing, lay quiet at last; but even worse than the delirium of fever was this awful stillness that had now come upon her, and Elizabeth, who had never faltered through all the trying, pitiful days when she would coax and plead and cry out for some one to take the heavy

something from her heart, had gone out of the room and had locked herself in her own, and had sunk in abandonment on her knees at the thought that Virginia, perhaps, was to leave them after all.

It could not—could not be! Virginia to be under the sod—Virginia to be still and voiceless and motionless forever! Great God!

The question she had asked as a little child when her mother died came back to her—“Why did God make us just to die us?” Why should Virginia be taken and she live? Why? Why? Why? Life was one great Why.

Outside she could hear Brydon and Irving and Laurie pacing up and down below her window. They were not talking, and she knew they were anxiously waiting now to hear the last report; but she could not give it to them—she could not trust herself to see them. Irving and Laurie had come immediately in response to Brydon's wire telling them of Virginia's illness, and for several days past they had been almost constantly at the house, going over each night to Hampstead and returning next morning with a helpless desire to be near and an anxiety too great to be away, and now when, man-like, they were childishly dependent on her for hope and courage, she was failing them, was giving way.

She was a coward. She had believed herself brave; had thought she was equal to what life demanded, and yet over there Portia and Liv-

Livingston were facing every advance and fighting every move, and if her heart strings were torn and aching, what were theirs?

The clock on the mantel struck the hour of seven, and with a shudder she got up slowly from her knees. She must go back, she might be needed. For a moment she stood in a voiceless agony of prayer, then went over to the silent chamber across the hall and entered it.

Livingston lifted his head warningly. Virginia's eyes were losing their wide and restless stare and the eyelids were flickering every now and then. To startle her might be fatal, and he motioned Elizabeth to sit by the door.

Portia was kneeling by the bed with eyes tearless, but full of a passionate appeal that watched each movement of Livingston's as though in his hands lay her only hope; and Joyce, who was calm again, was sitting in rigid silence near the window.

The ticking of the clock in the hall below sounded ominously loud and weird in its monotonous regularity as the minutes dragged themselves out slowly, but presently they saw the flickering eyelids rest and saw also that Livingston's fingers were no longer on Virginia's pulse.

"Thank God!" they heard him mutter, and as Portia caught his meaning, something within her gave way and the strain and suffering of the week past was lost for a while in blessed unconsciousness.

When later she opened her eyes she struggled to get up from the couch upon which they had put her, but Elizabeth shook her head. "She is asleep," she whispered, "and upon the length of it depends her life," and with a firm but gentle hand she pushed her back, and Portia, with heart that was barely beating, lay still, relaxed, immovable, yet making a final and supreme effort to stifle the question she dare not, dare not ask.

The pale light of dawn gave way to a rosy flush and still Virginia slept. The flush deepened into a widening flood of light and she slept on, but Livingston, bending over her, would not yet relax his guard. Elizabeth was watching him closely, and presently something she saw in his face caused a sudden rush of blood to surge over her's and her heart throbbed with such powerful pulsing that she scarce could breathe, and she wanted to fly out into the woods and thank God.

Virginia would live! The birds would help her sing it—Virginia would live! The wind would carry the message to all who loved her—Virginia would live! Virginia would live! Thank God—thank God—thank God!

Livingston was sitting by her when finally she waked, and she held out her hand in feeble recognition. He took it in his and kissed it gently, but he did not speak and neither did she. Her eyes looked questioningly into his,

however, and seeing it he called Portia over to the bed and quietly left the room, and for the first time in a week went over to Hampstead for a few hours of sorely-needed rest.

When he came back he sent for Portia and begged that he might be allowed to 'phone for a nurse.

"The worst is over, I hope," he said; "but most careful watching is still needed and you and the girls are no longer equal to it. You have held out with almost superhuman strength, but you cannot keep it up and each of you will be ill if you do not soon have rest."

"Not to-day, Mr. Livingston," she answered almost pleadingly; "please not to-day. Let us get her a little farther from the danger line before we trust her to any one else. I know it is foolish, but I have had one or two very unfortunate experiences with nurses, and I cannot get over my prejudice against them. Many of them I know are invaluable, and nobler women have never lived than some of them, but others"—she shook her head protestingly. "It is like everything else in life—there are good and bad among them, and if they pretend to know their business they put every one else aside, and I am not willing to be put aside just yet."

"Well, to-morrow; may I get one to-morrow?"

Portia still shook her head.

"Virginia will be stronger to-morrow I hope, but you may send for one the day after if you still think best."

In the morning Virginia's improvement was so marked that even before the doctor came Livingston had 'phoned for a nurse to be sent out the next day, for he saw that the strain and anxiety of the week that was past was beginning to tell plainly on each member of the little household, and unless rest was gotten soon some one else would probably be sick also.

During the day he saw Virginia frequently, though only for a few moments at a time; but the next afternoon she motioned him to her side.

"Joyce tells me you have been a wonderful nurse, but to-day you are just a doctor," and she tried to speak lightly, though her voice was very low. "You do not stay long enough for me to even thank you—"

He put out his hand to stop her, but before he could speak Elizabeth came hurriedly into the room.

"The nurse has come, Mr. Livingston; shall I bring her right in?"

Livingston turned to Portia.

"Shall she come in?"

Portia nodded and walked toward the door, and Livingston, bending over Virginia, felt the blood surge suddenly through his every vein from the look in her face as she raised her eyes to his.

There was no faltering, no disguise in it, and it was only by a mighty effort that he kept his arms from gathering her to his heart. She was

his—thank God! He had won her from death and she should be his as long as life lasted. His—His—His!

The flame in his face flushed even his temples, and then Virginia saw it whiten with a pallor that was worse than death. A noise at the door had caused him to look up, and as he did so he rose slowly from his chair and stood with his hands grasping it tightly.

She too turned and looked toward the door, and with a little cry held out her hands to him as if in fear.

The nurse came farther into the room, but at the look on Livingston's face Portia and Elizabeth instinctively drew back, and then they saw it flash with an anger that leaped into sudden uncontrol.

"In the name of God!" they heard him say, "what are you doing here?"

The woman who had come to nurse Virginia was Margaret Grey—his divorced wife.

CHAPTER XX

Virginia's convalescence was as rapid as her illness had been sharp and sudden, and though Livingston feared that the shock of his former wife's appearance in her room might affect her seriously, it seemed, on the contrary, to give her a sudden renewal of strength.

She would not let them send her away at once. With her keen intuition she divined instantly that there was a reason for this visit, this sudden posing as a nurse, and she wanted to find out what it was, so she motioned them to leave the room, and then turned to Mrs. Grey.

"Have you come to nurse me?" she asked a little unsteadily, though her eyes did not flinch. "Have you come to nurse me, Mrs. Grey?"

"Not a bit of it, little puritan. I simply came to see what you were like." She leaned carelessly on the foot of the bed, and resting her elbows upon it looked mockingly down upon its occupant.

"And may I ask why you care to see me?" Virginia was surprised at the strength of her own voice, but something within her was hardening, and she felt herself facing a fight.

Mrs. Grey laughed insolently.

“Usually I don’t give reasons; but I’ve been hearing some pretty stories about you lately, and I thought I’d run out and see how much truth there was in them.”

“And why as a nurse?”

The other shrugged her shoulders again.

“Two birds with one stone. By posing as a nurse, you—and my husband—I could see together.”

Her eyebrows lifted contemptuously, and she looked at Virginia with eyes full of mocking scorn and defiance.

“And so this is what he loves!” and she laughed insolently again.

“And your nurse’s costume—from whom did you get it?”

“From my nurse, little questioner. My nurse was sent for to come to you, and I locked her up in my apartments and took her clothes and came myself. Rather becoming, aren’t they?” and she surveyed herself critically in the mirror opposite.

“And your nurse’s name, what was it?”

Mrs. Grey turned and again rested her elbows on the foot of the bed.

“And what can that matter? She is my nurse, not yours. I’ve a nasty heart, which has attacks every now and then, and I pay her to be always on call. They had no business to send for her to come to you, and so I came myself. I wanted to see what sort of a little creature you were, and as this was a good

opportunity to do so, I took advantage of it. I always take advantage of my opportunities," and her inscrutable eyes looked mockingly down into Virginia's upturned face.

"And have you come back to New York to be near Mr. Livingston?"

Mrs. Grey started as if the words stung, then she threw out her hands with a meaning little gesture.

"Precisely. He was once my husband, and though it pleases him at present to rather ignore me, I do not intend to let him forget me, nevertheless."

With a sneer she walked away from the bed and over to the window, and Virginia, reaching out, touched the button by her side, and instantly Portia was in the room again.

"Will you please see that this lady is driven to the station in time for the next train," she said slowly; and then she looked toward Mrs. Grey, who had turned quickly. "I will not need you any longer, and now I must ask you to leave my room at once."

The latter stood a moment as if not understanding, and then burst into a mirthless laugh.

"What charming manners, little puritan. And so you would really have me go? Then I will; but if I were you I would not mention to the doctor that I did not like my nurse. It might not be pleasant for you, and your nurse wouldn't mind it in the least."

With a little wave of the hand she was gone, and Portia, closing the door behind her, saw by

the look on Virginia's face that Mrs. Grey had gained nothing by her daring scheme to see her.

It was over so soon, like a flash in a clear sky, that the excitement caused by Mrs. Grey's visit quickly died out in the relief of the realization that Virginia was not made worse by it, and by the latter's wish that no further reference be made concerning it.

Brydon's indignation, however, was not so easily controlled, and the audacity of the woman's act roused all his old hatred of her to a degree that was delightful to Joyce and Elizabeth, at least, and they did not attempt to stop any remarks he made concerning her.

"It was just like her," he declared hotly, when he heard the story of her visit. "She stops at nothing, and dares anything, and she's back in New York to make trouble for John. I wish to Heaven she was dead and buried! If she were a man one could handle her; but a woman—who can manage a woman?" And he shrugged his shoulders in disgust.

"Another woman," answered Joyce promptly. "Mrs. Grey won't have it all her own way if the test ever comes. But where is she living in New York?"

"Who knows? She must be watched, however; but John will never do it. To him she is as dead as Jupiter, but she'll make him hear from her yet, unless I'm mistaken. She loves notoriety as much as he hates it, and to have her own way she would hesitate at nothing."

“Do you suppose she loves him?” asked Elizabeth. “For unless she does, I can’t understand this interest in him.”

Brydon laughed skeptically.

“Interest! Hate can cause interest as well as love. She is not capable of loving—she is too selfish and soulless. What is that little saying about the fury of a woman scorned? Well, I think that’s the feeling she has for him. She could not conquer him, and she hates him for it—hates him for his indifference to her beauty and her power, and for the readiness with which he agreed to her suit for divorce. Oh, she hates him all right; but how in the Devil did she find out about Virginia? Beg pardon, but I’m never sure of myself when I talk about Margaret Grey. Hers is a name to swear at, and I think if I could get out in the woods and make a few remarks I’d feel better. But how do you suppose she found out that John”—he hesitated slightly—“that John is in love with Virginia?”

The girls shook their heads. The question was as unanswerable to them as to him. Evidently, however, she had some one watching Livingston’s movements.

“I said as much to him last night,” grumbled Brydon, “but he doesn’t believe it, or rather he is perfectly indifferent to it; but the thing he isn’t indifferent to is her coming out here. He’s at white heat about that, and whatever else he may in time forgive her for, that will not be

one of the things included. Has Virginia said anything about it to either of you?"

Joyce shook her head slowly, while Elizabeth left the room without answering, and then Joyce looked at Brydon doubtfully.

"She has never said anything to us about anything," she began vaguely, "and I don't think it's quite right in us to talk about it, even to ourselves, until she does—do you?" Her face flushed, though she smiled slightly at the ambiguousness of her words. "I mean we oughtn't to discuss her affairs until"—she hesitated again—"until she has decided what she is going to do."

Brydon pretended not to see the troubled eyes, which he longed mightily to kiss, but instead he put his hands in his pockets for safe-keeping, and then he looked at her with sudden determination.

"I don't suppose we ought, and though I'm terribly interested in her and Jack, I am very much more personally interested, at present, in something else, and if you don't mind telling me when you intend to marry me, I'll appreciate the confidence very much."

"I can't tell you that which I don't know myself, and besides you forget the toast we drank the night we heard about Portia's money. Even if I don't 'resist love,' I ought to 'refuse matrimony' for a little while, at least, for it wouldn't be fair to repudiate our toast so soon. After a while we can talk about it, Brydon, but not now."

“After a little while or a long while?” and there was a touch of boyish impatience in his voice.

“I don’t know which while,” and she laughed a little shakily; “but when Virginia decides to leave, I may follow, but I haven’t the courage to go first.”

“If we’re to wait for Virginia we’ve a long rest ahead of us. If Margaret Grey were dead I would rather see John and Virginia married than any two people on earth—except you and me; but John has got his hands full to bring Virginia to his point of view.”

Joyce raised her eyes questioningly.

“Do you mean you think it would be wrong for her to marry him?”

“Wrong?” he repeated, almost querulously. “Wrong? No, I don’t think it would be wrong; but there are some women you don’t think of as doing certain things, and Virginia is one of them. One can’t associate her with complications of this sort. She’s the kind a man believes in, somehow, for she’s so clear white one feels she could stand a searchlight forever, and it rather hurts to think—” He stopped abruptly, then held out his hand. “As you said just now, however, it’s not our business to discuss it; good-night.”

Joyce looked up in surprise.

“You’re not going, it’s only nine o’clock.”

“I know, but I promised John I would be back early to-night. He’s been trying to get

hold of me for nearly a week to talk over some business matters, but I've dodged him as though he were a leper. However, it's got to be heard, and to-night is as good as any other to hear it I suppose. Good-night."

"Good-night, and if what you hear isn't interesting, perhaps to-morrow I may tell you something that is," and she put her hand in his and looked at him with a provoking little smile that he could not understand.

"All right," he called out as he mounted his horse, "I'll be over to-morrow to report."

On the morrow, however, he was not over, nor on the next day, nor for several days, and just as Joyce was beginning to feel indignant at hearing nothing further from him than a hurried note that he was compelled to stay in town for several days on important business, the indignation turned into consternation at the sensational article with which the paper was filled on the fourth day of his absence.

There had been a long talk between Brydon and Livingston concerning the former's suspicions about Parker, and his reasons therefore were a shock to Brydon's sunny, unsuspecting nature which sobered him suddenly; but not until the next day, when he went to his office, would he really believe that Livingston was not mistaken, was not confounding him with some one else.

Parker was out of town, and no one knew his address. The men at his office thought Brydon

knew it, and when they saw the look on his face when he heard that Parker had not been seen for several days, they exchanged significant glances among themselves, and Brydon saw at once that something was wrong, and something of which he was wholly ignorant and innocent, but from which he would suffer keenly nevertheless.

No time was to be wasted, however, and by night he and Livingston had been over a good part of Parker's private business matters, and what he discovered whitened his face with shame that he should have been for years associated with a man of whose real life and character he knew so little, and of whose rascality he had never dreamed.

In addition to being an exceptionally fine lawyer, Parker for years had been in charge of several very valuable estates, and as his returns from these had been large, their owners had never inquired into his methods or asked for a settlement. In consequence he had first gotten into loose ways of doing business, and then into criminal ones to cover up his carelessness, and finally, in an effort to cover losses made in stocks, he had used everything available, and in a final throw had lost.

It was an old story, but one that was bitterly new to Brydon, and the mortification of having his name connected with such a man aged him in a few days as only business troubles can, and Livingston, watching him, felt a thrill of pride

that his belief in Brydon's rock-bottom character was about to be tested and proved, and knew that in the end this bitter experience would not be without its lesson to him.

The next few days were the most trying of Brydon's life. Through them all he and Livingston, with the head office man, worked unceasingly, and though each day made the outlook blacker and more hopeless, still, not until the news was out and the office full of angry men and hysterical women clamoring to know the truth did he realize the full horror of it all, or the difference it would make in the lives of these people.

He knew no more of this part of the business than Livingston himself, and the condition of Parker's books was as much a revelation to the one as to the other. But what was a greater source of astonishment to Brydon than to Livingston was the knowledge that his mother's entire estate was in his partner's hands, and had been for some while, and that without his knowledge.

"Great God!" Livingston heard him say; "my mother will be ruined!" And he buried his face in his arms on the desk and shook as if with a chill.

Livingston came over and stood by him.

"Didn't you know your mother's affairs were in Parker's hands?" he asked. "The books show that for four years he has had entire charge of her estate. Didn't she tell you when she turned over things to him?"

Brydon shook his head.

"I never dreamed it. Once she asked my advice about doing so, and I strongly objected. I knew Parker had more than he could attend to, and besides he was a lawyer, not a trust company, and I didn't approve of his attending to these outside matters anyway. She never referred to the subject again, and as she rarely mentioned business affairs to me, I supposed that Sharp & Cone were still attending to things for her as they had done for years."

Livingston smiled slightly.

"Sharp & Cone are out of date for this age. Parker's rates of interest were more powerful arguments than any you might have advanced. You see by his books that he has been paying some people, your mother especially, anywhere from six to twelve per cent. on some of his investments. It's singular, however, that she never mentioned to you the change she had made."

Brydon drummed his fingers on the desk nervously and his face flushed at Livingston's words.

"My mother has some very peculiar ideas," he said a little bitterly, "and one of them is that she never fails in judgment, and as it happens that we rarely agree about anything we have gotten into the safe habit of never discussing our affairs with each other. I don't think, either, that she has ever forgiven my father for the way he made his will, putting, as he did, my

share of his estate in the hands of a trust company until I was thirty-five. She thought it a reflection on her business capacity, and as she can have nothing to do with the management of my money, she has never permitted me to have anything to do with hers. Only a few months ago, however, she told me she was worth half as much again as she was when my father died, and that the latter must have been insane to have made the eccentric will he did."

"Your father was a very wise man," commented Livingston briefly. "But can you account for Parker's special vengeance on your mother? Every one whose affairs were in his hands will lose heavily, but your mother will be, with the exception of the house she lives in, practically penniless. He has hypothecated nearly every security she has, sold her property, forged her signature, and used his power-of-attorney far more freely in her case than in any other. He hasn't forged your name for a dollar, but there seems to be something personal in his treatment of your mother—can you account for it?"

Brydon shook his head slowly, and then his expression changed.

"Socially, mother never recognized Parker," he said presently, and his face grew red with shame. "Once I remember she gave him the cut direct, and though I did all I could to fix it up, I don't believe Parker ever got over it. They were scrupulously polite when they met,

which was seldom; but Parker never mentioned her name to me after the little affair of which I am speaking."

"Did he know that you were ignorant of her affairs being in his hands?"

"I suppose so. Mother must have told him not to speak of it," and Brydon wiped his forehead wearily. "It's horrible, John, horrible! What will the world think when it hears of this peculiar condition of things between mother and son and business partner? For the first time in my life I thank God my father is dead."

"Were your father alive this would never have happened," Livingston answered shortly, taking a telegram from the boy at the door and handing it over to Brydon. "Here, this is for you."

Brydon opened it nervously. He glanced over it, then threw it on the desk and scribbled an answer.

"It's the third one to-day from mother," he said presently. "She insists upon my coming immediately and telling her about this horrible story in the papers. I wired her to come at once, but she pays no attention to that of course. However, she must come, and this is my third wire to tell her so. The sooner it is over the better. I'm willing to make everything I possess over to her, but unfortunately I can't get hold of anything except what I've saved for some years back, and every dollar of that is to go toward settling the affairs of this concern."

Livingston looked up quickly.

"That is not required of you," he said slowly; "you are in no way responsible for what has happened."

"That may be, but my name is on this door, and the place has gone down in disgrace. If I can help a little in fixing up some of these matters, I will be only too thankful. Mother will not really suffer, but some of these other people may. I only wish to heaven I could settle dollar for dollar with every creditor on Parker's books."

Livingston held out his hand.

"Money isn't everything, old man—a clean name in comparison makes it a small matter. By the way, has Parker a family?"

Brydon nodded negatively.

"Widower—wife died years ago and left no children. Strange to say, I know almost nothing of Parker socially. He prided himself on being something of a sport, I believe, and while I knew he liked cards and horses pretty well, still I thought it merely a weakness, not a passion."

"Well, he's played his last game if he's ever caught. The reward offered for his return is a pretty stimulating one, and I don't doubt he'll be found after a while, if alive."

"Poor devil!" and Brydon's voice was a little husky. "Retribution is a terrible necessity. I believe after all I would rather hear he was dead."

He bent his head over his desk and pretended to write, but Livingston saw that his eyes were blurred.

"I'm going out to-night," he said after a moment, without looking up. "I can't stand it any longer by myself, and besides it is only right that they should know more than I can tell them in a letter."

Livingston looked away. He knew well that all his help and comradeship and courage were as nothing compared to what Joyce could do for him; and that Brydon was longing unutterably to unburden his heart to her and to receive in return that which a woman alone can give, he well understood, and the thought filled him with almost bitter envy.

He took up some papers and began to look over them.

"I'm glad you're going out," he said, opening a large paper and glancing over it carelessly. "I'll 'phone Thomas to have dinner promptly, so you can have a long evening."

"And you?" asked Brydon, turning quickly, "aren't you coming too?"

"Not to-night. I've some matters to settle up, and don't think I'll go."

"Then of course I won't."

A sigh of disappointment and weariness escaped him unconsciously, and Livingston detected both instantly.

"Indeed you will, and you will go on that 6.20 train. Because it isn't convenient for me to go is no reason for you to stay."

"Convenient the Devil!" and Brydon's voice was boyishly cross. "It isn't a question of convenience, and if you don't go, I won't."

"All right, if you insist upon it"; but Livingston did not look at Brydon and the latter saw he had made a mistake.

"I'm a brute," he said humbly, "and I beg your pardon, Jack. I'm all on edge to-day. Is there anything I can do?" He looked at Livingston wistfully, but the latter merely shook his head.

"Thanks, no; I believe there's nothing. Thomas 'phones me every day, you know."

Virginia was still sick, but not since he had left her room, when his former wife entered it, had he seen her, and Brydon understood that not until he was sent for would he go over again.

There was a splendid patience about him, however, that was a new quality, for he was not by nature very patient or tolerant; but when determined he could be anything, and he was desperately determined just now.

For a few moments only the scratch of Livingston's pen broke the silence that had fallen on them, and then he looked at his watch suddenly.

"If you're going to make that 6.20 train you've no time to lose," he said cheerfully. "Get a move on you, and forget everything but the one thing needful; good night."

CHAPTER XXI

The utter demoralization of Joyce when she realized the nature of Virginia's illness was nowhere evident when she heard of the trouble that had come to Brydon, and she read the startling and garbled account in the papers with only the quiet comment that there was no touch of stain upon him, and that the loss of his money was a small matter compared to the loss of some other things in life.

To Brydon, however, she had written urgently:

"Come to me at once and tell me everything. Whatever has come to you, has come to me; and if for you there is disgrace or sorrow or loss of any kind, it is disgrace and sorrow and loss to me; and if you would have me believe in your love for me you will come at once and give me my portion to bear. Sometimes I have been afraid, sometimes I have not felt sure, but now I know—I know, and for the sake of the love we bear each other I pray you to come to me and tell me all."

Brydon came, and the warm pressure of Elizabeth's hands, and Portia's gentle kiss, brought tears to his eyes of which he was not ashamed,

and he turned to Joyce with words that he could not utter, but which she could well understand.

Late into the night they talked with the perfect freedom and abandon that only trouble can make possible, and every detail Joyce would have him tell, every technicality explain, and every possibility face; and the strain and anxiety of the past few days relaxed strangely in the courage with which she heard it all, and the confidence that, for him at least, this trouble would not be without its blessing.

"Sometimes I have thought your life had been too smooth and easy and luxurious to make the best out of you that was possible," she said after a while, "and you needed something to bring you face to face with the realities that other people have to contend with, and possibly this may do it," and she slipped her hand shyly into his. "Oh, Brydon, I have been sick with terror lest in some way you might have been dragged into this thing innocently. Let every dollar of your money go, if necessary. I do not know what is necessary, but if there is anything you could have prevented had you known, if there is any one who will suffer more than—we—let them have it. We are young and strong, and we can work and wait."

He looked at her searchingly, then with a great thrill of thankfulness took her in his arms.

"We may some day have to work—but we are not going to wait," he cried joyously, and the first note of gladness his voice had held for

days rang richly through it. "Being a woman, it has taken trouble to bring you to me, and now may I ask when we can begin the little journey?"

He held her off and looked at her anxiously, while the moonlight flooded her face with a rich radiance.

"Whenever you think best," and she could not say more because he foolishly would not let her.

An experience entirely new to Mrs. Jenifer Irskine Field, and one not at all to her liking, was to be in New York in midsummer, and yet in response to Brydon's last wire she had come. Her knowledge of Parker's flight from the city and the exposure of his rascality had been gained chiefly from the papers, and notwithstanding she had wired Brydon repeatedly to come to her at once, she had been forced to do as he had first directed—come to him.

Not for an instant did she believe that Parker had used any great amount of her money, or tampered with her bonds or property. Whatever he may have done to other people's, she was very sure he had not dared to trifle with hers, and to come back to the city to look into matters that were no doubt entirely safe was irritating to a degree that was beyond control, and she did not see why Brydon could not have attended to her interests for her and thus have prevented this hot and disagreeable stay in town.

That she was in a state of indignation and irritation, but not of anxiety or alarm, Brydon saw at once, and her first words made him realize he had a painful experience before him.

"And where is Mr. Parker?" she asked when their greeting was over and they had plunged into the subject uppermost in the minds of each. "Why doesn't he come and settle this thing for himself? It isn't your place to do it."

Brydon changed his position restlessly.

"You don't seem to understand, mother, that Mr. Parker is terribly involved. He has been speculating heavily of late, trying to get back what he had lost, and instead going down deeper and deeper each day, and when finally he saw it was all up, he skipped—has gone to the Devil for all we know, and of course he will never come back unless he is brought. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are involved, and while all who had any private business relations with him will lose, some will do so much more heavily than others."

He paused—the look on his mother's face checked him. She was sitting rigidly upright, but her hands had ceased to twirl the fan she held in them.

"Do you mean to say that everybody who had put their affairs in his charge will lose something—everybody?" The tone of her voice was that of incredulity.

Brydon nodded.

"That is what I mean."

“And I?—do you mean to say that I will be a loser by this man?”

He nodded again.

“Of course, that is why I sent for you. Didn't you understand why I had sent for you?”

She stiffened even more rigidly.

“I supposed you sent for me to know what change I wished made and whom I wished to take charge of my matters.”

“And you did not fear that you, too, were involved in this thing?”

“Of course not, why should I? Mr. Parker was your partner and I could not conceive of his taking so great a liberty as to act without my consent or instructions. Do you mean to say that he has used *my* money—misappropriated *my* funds? Is this what you have sent for me to hear?”

Had it not been so tragic, Brydon would have smiled at the tone his mother's voice had taken, and at her utter lack of conception of the methods of a dishonest man. Did she suppose Parker was likely to have asked her permission to forge her name?

He ran his handkerchief across his face and mopped the perspiration from it before answering. His mother's dignity to-day was out of order, and by a perversion of will he could not fail to see its comical side.

She waited a moment in stiff silence, then repeated her question:

“Am I to understand you have sent for me to tell me that Mr. Parker has been using my money?”

Brydon got up and began to walk restlessly up and down the room with his hands in his pockets.

“I sent for you, mother, because I thought I could better explain things to you by talking than by writing, and moreover your presence is required here by law. It is very hard for me to tell you what I must tell you, and I wish to God it had been my money, not yours, that Parker has made away with, but it will do no good to keep back anything, and if you will let me I will tell you all I know about this miserable business.”

For an hour he talked, and in anger and dismay too great for words his mother listened—listened as one stunned into silence by the awfulness of what she had heard. Her face had turned to a pallor that was frightful, and Brydon, seeing it, rang quickly and ordered some wine to be sent up at once.

She pushed it from her in disdain.

“I do not need it. Go on with this pretty tale you are telling—the tale of a son who allows his mother to be robbed before his eyes.”

The scorn in her voice was withering, and the glass in Brydon’s hand dropped with a crash at his feet.

“Take back those words—there are some things a man does not allow even his mother to

say to him!" and Brydon's voice rang out clear and hard.

She made a gesture of dissent.

"Go on," she said coldly; "go on to the end."

"Not until you retract what you have said."

She got up and stood before him in a frenzy of shock and rage and despair.

"Take them back? How can I take them back? Is it not true that I am penniless—a pauper, a bankrupt—and my son tells me it is his partner who has made me so?"

Her voice was shrill and high, and her hands tore the lace on her gown into shreds. Her face was twitching painfully, and Brydon saw the shock had been too much for her. He poured out another glass of wine, and pushing her back into a chair held it to her lips and forced her to drink it.

She leaned back a moment with her eyes closed, then suddenly sat upright again as if swept by a fresh wave of fury.

"If it is not true, what I have said, prove it!" she cried excitedly. "I am robbed of my money and my son loses none of his. There is something behind this. You want to humble me—to make me welcome this nobody as your wife—to make me yield to your wishes—and you let my money be stolen that I may become the object of your charity! My God—I to be dependent! *I* to be penniless!"

She held her jeweled hands out in front of her and stared at them wildly, then in a passion

of anger that was transforming, she rose and pointed her finger at him.

“Listen! You think you have conquered me, but you do not know me. Beggar me—rob me—defy me—do what you will, but I shall never call this girl you wish to marry—my daughter! May my tongue cleave unto my mouth, may my voice—” She swayed heavily and put her hand to her throat, then sank suddenly to the floor.

It took only a few minutes for the doctors to reach her, for Livingston to come, for a nurse to be on hand, but those few minutes were an eternity to Brydon, who watched in a dazed silence by the bed of his mother, who, if she died, would die with an accusation on her lips and a curse in her heart for her only son.

He buried his face in his hands and prayed God to spare her that she might repent—to pardon her should she not live to pray for pardon for herself.

Through the long night the doctors and nurse worked faithfully; and Livingston, waiting quietly in the next room, for Brydon’s sake, stayed near. From him he had learned enough to make him guess more, and to understand that the shock and rage caused by the realization of her loss had been but the climax to the stored-up anger and opposition that for some time past she had been nourishing in her heart against Brydon for his daring love of a girl she would not know.

By morning the doctors said there was a chance for recovery; in a few days they could tell better, however. The stroke had been a severe one, but they had seen equally as bad. Consciousness had not returned, but that would probably be all right. Her speech? They could not tell about that, and they had shaken hands and left.

Through the next two or three days Brydon hovered between the bedside of his mother and his office. Out of his hands the court had taken all of Parker's affairs, but his own private ones needed attention, and for many hours he talked with the trustees of his property, trying to devise some way by which he could transfer a part of his estate to his mother should she live.

There was no way, however. All of his accumulated income he had turned over to the receivers for the benefit of Parker's creditors, and the only thing he could do was to order that in the event of his mother's recovery a certain portion of his income was to be deposited to her credit.

The bitterness in his heart for her unnatural behavior rankled deeply, and he was miserably afraid she would die before he had forgiven her. For hours he would watch by her side, and as he saw the face grow pinched and gray, and noticed the wrinkles and lines which she had known so cleverly how to hide, he was filled with great pity that she had so wasted the possi-

bilities of womanhood and motherhood, and his heart was terrified at the emptiness of her hands should her soul be required of her as he watched.

But it was not to be required of her just yet. After a while she opened her eyes and looked at him, and the light of consciousness was in them, and she tried to speak, but she could not, and so long as she should live she would never speak again, the doctors said.

The horror, the awful horror, that crept into her face as the truth of this came over her broke down all bitterness in Brydon's heart, and he knelt by her bed and buried his face in his hands in a pitiful sobbing he could not control. After all, she was his mother—and now speechless, helpless!

All else was forgotten and he was a boy again. She had given him life—God help him, he would be faithful to the end!

CHAPTER XXII

Virginia lay back in a steamer chair which had been placed in the coolest corner of the veranda for her, and looked out upon the broad fields as they stretched away in green undulations, and beyond them to the silvery thread of the river which wound its way lazily between. It was very beautiful, very peaceful and restful, and she was grateful that it was still hers to enjoy, and yet—she closed her eyes sharply. The loneliness, the absence of the years to come suddenly confronted her, and she was conscious of a great shrinking from the sacrifice that life appeared to ask of her. Was she right? Was she doing right? How could she know? Was she to go on indefinitely with this question forever in her heart?

So many strange and dreadful things had happened since that night only a few weeks ago when they were sitting on the veranda with the outlook of a quiet, happy, hum-drum life before them. And since then—Elizabeth was right, they were getting like people in books; they were getting mixed up with sensational things, and the experience was horrible. She was

almost well now, but still she kept so strangely weak. Something within her seemed to have stopped and everything was an effort—even to think.

She had not seen Livingston since he left the room on the day his former wife entered it, and until she sent for him she knew he would not come. She leaned back among her cushions and closed her eyes lest the tears with which their lashes were wet should fall upon her face. The others must not see and must not know of this fierce struggle in her heart and conscience. It was said that everybody had their cup to drink, and if that were true then surely one should not be forced to see the dregs in the cup of others, and she did not mean that they should know how bitter was the one that had been given her to drain.

The house was very quiet. Inside, Elizabeth was busy with some work, and Joyce, who had driven down to the station to meet Portia, had waved her a merry good-by as she was lost to sight, and the air had seemed to grow suddenly still now that she was away. Joyce was so beautifully happy, so splendidly strong and vigorous and radiant with life; and the one silver lining to the grayness of the past weeks had been her perfect surrender to Brydon. In the fall, perhaps, when the leaves would be turning yellow and red and brown, and the air would be crisp and cool, they would be married and go away; go away to begin the new life which

would be gay and brilliant, and which Joyce would adorn so well; and she was so glad for them, so very, very glad.

Her lips quivered and her lashes grew heavy, but with an impatient little gesture she brushed them away quickly, and changed her position that she might better watch the sun as it sank in a radiance rich and warm and red behind the hills and lost itself in a quiver of changing glory. "To-morrow it will return and be lost to sight, and to-morrow again, and for an eternity of to-morrows, when my little life will have been spent and sunk into forgetfulness," she thought; "and for the brief space of time that is given me, is it wise to cling to ideals, or should we let them go and be happy? Be happy?—would she be happy if she let them go?"

The sound of horses' hoofs upon the gravel startled her, and turning she waved her hand to Joyce and Portia and sat upright in her chair that they might not guess her utter weariness. The day had been a trying one for Portia she knew. In response to a pitiful appeal from Brydon she had gone in to see his mother, and the effort to conquer her objection to doing so had cost her a struggle, but in the end she had yielded, and for Brydon's sake had gone.

"And how is the invalid?" she asked cheerfully, coming up to Virginia and taking her face between her hands. "Has the day been long, dear?"

“Very. Elizabeth is overcome, I think, trying to entertain me,” and Virginia laughed lightly as she returned Portia’s kiss. “But how is Aunt Agatha?”

Portia took off her hat and threw it on a chair opposite, while she sat down in another and brushed her hair back from her forehead.

“How is she? I hardly know, though I would not have believed it possible for any one to change as she has done. She cannot speak, you know; but her right side is not affected, and she can write, and to see her effort to do so is pitiful beyond words. She is intensely nervous, and the strain in her eyes never relaxes except when Brydon comes into the room, and then she begins to cry like a child. He is the only one who can manage her when she gets hysterical, for though he is very gentle and patient, he is at the same time positive, and the nurse says he can quiet her when everything else fails. Her helplessness enrages her, and her inability to talk puts her in a passion frequently. As yet she is by no means softened by her sickness, but in the end I believe it will bring her to her senses and touch the woman in her after a while.”

Portia leaned back and looked at Joyce quizzically.

“Her ruling passion will never die until she does—paralysis or apoplexy notwithstanding,” she continued, sighing slightly. “She wanted to know all about you to-day, Joyce; who you

were, who your people were, where you came from, and various other things, and the biography I gave of you was most entertaining."

Joyce clasped her hands behind her head and laughed good-naturedly.

"Why didn't you tell her I put my credentials in a trust company when I became a working woman."

"Had she not been sick, I think I would; but as it was I went back to the remotest period of American history and passed in review all of your ancestors I could remember. I also took occasion to tell her that you had given us real anxiety for fear you would not marry Brydon, who had been so patient and persistent in his efforts to marry you."

"Good for the old Mother Superior!" laughed Elizabeth. "I would have given many pennies to have seen her face when you made that little speech."

"It was funny," and Portia smiled a little at the remembrance of her aunt's expression. "But she wants to know you, Joyce, and I promised her I would ask you to go with me some day to see her."

Joyce shook her head slowly.

"When she wants to do more than gratify her curiosity, and when she sends for me properly, I may go; otherwise, I don't see the necessity. Were she not ill, she would have to come to me; as it is, I suppose some day I may have to go to her. Still, there is no need to hurry,"

and she got up and started to go indoors. On the threshold she stopped a moment. "By the way, I met Mr. Livingston at the station," she said, trying to speak carelessly. "He is going back to town to-night and is only out for a few hours. I asked him to come over,"—she twisted the roses in her belt nervously,—"but he declined. He doesn't look very well."

Nobody spoke for a moment, and the silence was becoming painful, when Pleasants announced supper, and directly it was over, Virginia went to her room.

She put on her wrapper and drew up a chair by the window. As yet there was no moon, but the sky was thickly gemmed with stars, and as she watched them she realized she was appealing to them for light and strength and wisdom—for the battle between her heart and conscience was waging bitterly to-night, and she knew the final test was about to be made.

She had had one long, long talk with Portia—dear Portia! How hard she had tried to be honest and true to her own convictions, and yet tender and tolerant of what might perhaps be hers. She had not asked for advice, and Portia had not given it. They were each too individual to judge for the other, and Virginia knew then as she knew now, that she must settle this thing for herself.

Joyce and Elizabeth had each spoken to her once concerning it, and she understood that,

however she might decide, they would defend her position; but since their first talk the subject had never been reopened. Hers was not a nature to speak freely or frequently of those things which touched her most strongly, for she was too sensitively organized to often bare her heart to others, and like Mary of old, the things to her which were richest and deepest and tenderest, she hid in her heart and pondered them o'er and o'er.

She could not go on like this, however; she must decide one way or the other. Something too was due Livingston. If only she could bear this burden alone!

For a long time she sat by the window, facing fearlessly every objection to, and defending bravely every argument for, her marriage to him, and finally, worn and spent by the unanswerableness of it all, she fell into a light sleep. For a while, just a little while, she slept, and presently she opened her eyes quietly as if awakened by the light of the moon which flooded the room and played full upon her face. She put her hands up as if to shut from her eyes its white radiance, and a sudden stillness seemed to have fallen on all the earth, and on her own heart as well.

“God reigns, and Right is Right!” The words rang in her ears and filled her brain and throbbed in her heart. “God reigns, and Right is Right!”

She got up and steadied herself against the back of her chair. The light was getting brighter and brighter. She walked over to the bed and stood for a moment, then with a half sob she fell upon her knees and buried her face in her arms—"God reigns, and Right is Right!"

CHAPTER XXIII

Livingston lowered the light on the library table slightly, then touched the button in the wall.

"I see a number of cards in the hall," he said to Thomas, who had come in answer to his ring. "Have they been left at night or during the day?"

"Some at night and some in the day, sir," answered Thomas. "The gentlemen generally stops to ask when you'll be back, and whenever there's any ladies they comes in them coaching parties which are very numerous these moonlight nights."

"Well, if any one should come to-night I'm to be excused—that's all."

Thomas bowed and left, and Livingston, going back to the table, sat down in a deep chair near it and rested his head wearily upon its tall back, while with his fingers he drummed restlessly upon its arms.

The strong, resolute look upon his face gave way gradually to one of baffled helplessness, and the pain and suffering in it, as he no longer controlled its expression, made it seem strangely white and worn.

After a while he took a letter from his pocket and opened it. He already knew it by heart, but he was not yet willing to admit its full meaning, and as he began to read it again there was a deep frown upon his forehead and his hands trembled slightly.

“If this were only my pain, my suffering,” it began, “I could bear it more bravely, accept it more willingly; but because it is yours also, because you tell me that I am withholding happiness from you, I have been afraid of myself—afraid that I would yield to your love and mine. And yet, you would not have me come to you, came I not freely, gladly, joyously—and I cannot come to you in this way now.

“How I have longed to come to you! How I have wanted to push aside every barrier that keeps me from you, and come to you; yes, go with you to the ends of the earth, if you so wished, God only knows. And the struggle has been so sharp and horrible, so bitter and relentless, that like a coward I have sometimes longed for death to end it and to blot out all remembrance of it.

“I could not be convinced at first that this sacrifice should be required of me; this test be made of the principles which I have absorbed and accepted from childhood, but now that it has come, I dare not deny them nor refuse to accept my share of the burden which women must bear.

“And since I have seen her, my heart has cried out more stubbornly than ever to come to

you and show you what love is. Not self-love or selfish love, but love that is deep and undying—but I cannot come, I cannot come! I am laying bare my heart to you; I am keeping back no thought in it, for its every throb is for you, and in yours it longs unutterably to hide itself and be at peace—but I must not be your wife.

“You tell me I have no right to sacrifice your happiness and mine, and perhaps that is true. But neither have I the right to sacrifice those things which are greater than happiness and more eternal, for deeper than all law, and more powerful, is the conviction that it is required of a woman to guard the purity of her home; to preserve those institutions which protect it, and to recognize them as sacred and final, and I cannot rid myself of this conviction; I cannot shake it from my mind and heart.

“It has seemed so short—my life—when I have thought of spending it with you, and ten thousand times ten thousand I have been tempted to yield; and then—and then—because it is so short I dare not fail it. There will be lonely days, dark days, bitter days, when I, perhaps, shall cry out against the decision I am now making, and yet if our love be love it will stand all strain, endure all tests—if our love be love.

“And now I am going to ask you a great something. You remember that I told you you must go away—because I loved you. I felt that night I had no right to love you; that the

woman who was once your wife still gave you her love and I dared not share it with her. Since then I have found out the nature of hers, and mine is of another sort, and what I would ask you is—can we be friends, dear friends and true? Can we see each other; share each other's interests, get out of life much that it can give us, and put from us all that it cannot? Can we be friends—just friends?

“Perhaps I do not know what I am asking. Perhaps it is not womanly to ask it; but to see you, to talk with you, would give me happiness that could come in no other way, and if I could give it to you I should be content with life. You are to be free, however; free to do what in the years to come may seem best to you. And now, if I am not asking too great a gift of you when I ask for your friendship, come to me and tell me that it may be mine—and believe me that through life and death and all eternity, I shall be always and forever yours.

“VIRGINIA.”

The letter dropped from Livingston's hand, and mechanically he stooped and picked it up and put it again in his pocket.

No—Virginia did not know what she was asking. No woman could know. He got up and began to walk restlessly backward and forward across the room. He was burning with rebellion, almost anger, at her decision, and he was not ready to submit to it. Why was it life mocked him with the mirage of happiness and

never gave him happiness itself? Why should his love have been given so passionately, so overwhelmingly to one who would not become his wife, but who admitted so unreservedly her love for him? He had feared this from the first, but he had hoped to conquer her conscience by his will—and he had failed.

There would be no use in arguing the matter with her. The processes by which she had reached her conclusion were of the kind a man could not readily understand, and she would baffle his arguments by the exercise of a faculty which sees through and beyond a thing, and which ignores the logical methods by which it is usually evaded.

The strong, intuitive, spiritualizing forces of her nature made her recognize the truth and strip it of the sham sophistries with which it is so often shrouded; and for her there could be only the acceptance of the naked fact that the penalty of broken moral laws, as the penalty of broken natural laws, must be endured, and the law not changed to lessen the penalty, but the penalty accepted to uphold the law.

Such an acceptance was not Livingston's point of view, however, and to him Virginia's position in the matter was unreasonable, illogical, and unnatural. At first he had thought that after a while she would come to see it differently; would see the folly and foolishness of making both suffer for the sake of a standard the world was not ready to accept as being re-

quired of it—but now he knew that this would never be.

And she had asked if they could not be friends. Friends! When a man is starving, is he satisfied by the sight of food? Friends! Was he to spend his whole life waiting for the deliverance of death? Was he to be denied, perhaps forever, the close and dear comradeship of a wife and be content with the formalities of friendship?

And yet she had said if love be love it would stand all strain, endure all tests—if love be love.

He stopped his walk and came back to the table and again sat down. Perhaps a woman's love could stand all strain—but a man's, could his? He buried his face in his arms as they rested on the table, and bit his teeth hard into his lips. Was his love less pure than hers, less enduring, less patient?

For a long time he sat thus and struggled with the temptation to go to her and plead his love and loneliness; show her how illogical was her position; reason her out of her scruples; prove to her how strained was her conscience and how over-estimated her sense of duty. Should he go? Should he refuse to accept her decision; refuse to accept for her and for himself the separation of the years to come, the denial of happiness and the emptiness of home when both their hearts cried out for it? Should he go? Should he go?

The stillness of the room became oppressive and he got up and walked out upon the porch

at the side of the house. In the distance he could see the dim lights at Spinstervilla, and his heart softened as he realized how over there Virginia had struggled and suffered as he was doing now. The air blew fresh and fragrant, cooling the hot flush upon his face, and after a while his heart grew quieter. The influence of her spirit seemed to possess him, and instinctively he held out his arms toward the dim lights, and then dropped them quickly to his side again.

From where he stood a good view of the beautiful grounds surrounding his own home could be had, and as his eyes swept carelessly over them, in his heart there was more bitterness than gratitude, for the moment, in what he saw, and a keen sense of his inability to do anything with all his wealth for the woman he so loved filled him with a renewed realization of impatient helplessness.

For some time he walked up and down, watching the moon as it stole in and out of the clouds, now shedding a flood of light, now shrinking back under cover, now starting out bravely again, and he wondered if Virginia were watching it also. At the thought something within him suddenly relaxed, and his throat grew full and tight—

She had conquered. He would be her dear friend and true. He would accept her decision—to do otherwise would be but to torture her, and he must spare her pain, no matter what his own might be.

The hot rebellion that had possessed him when first he read her letter, gave way gradually to a quieter facing of what she asked; and the realization of her love for him softened strangely the bitter pain and disappointment that had first surged over him, and after a while he went back into the library and once more took out her letter. For a moment he held it unsteadily toward the light, and then he kissed it again and again, as one does some dear, dead thing that is to belong forever to one's past, and with eyes that saw not he drew toward him paper and pen.

She had won. He would not urge her to marry him. The beautiful clear eyes must keep ever their unshadowed light, and she was right. When love is love it will stand all strain, endure all tests—when love is love.

CHAPTER XXIV

Livingston's answer to Virginia's letter was as honest and frank as her own.

"I cannot see this thing as you do, nor from your standpoint," he wrote. "To me your position is strained and morbid in its severity, yet I do not question your sincerity, and I can only abide by your verdict. To say I accept it patiently would be untrue. It mocks me with my helplessness and galls me with its bitterness, and still my belief in you is so great that I know, if you could, you would spare me the suffering your decision causes.

"Love was long in coming to me, but it has conquered me now that it has come, and for you I am ready to wait eternally. It pains me beyond words of telling to know I have caused you sorrow—I who would so gladly give you only the beautiful things of life—but you deny me the power, and my best evidence of yours is the acceptance of my limitations.

"I am going away for a while. I shall have to fight this a little longer before I am sure of myself. Mine is no philosophic nature, and it does not readily adjust itself to inaction or defeat; and until I can accept both properly, I

shall stay away from you. You have given me that which I am most unworthy of—your love; and life has been new and strangely sweet since you confessed it. But more, ten thousand times more, do I now want you for my wife that I may prove to you the unutterableness of a love that would spend and be spent for you. And yet, since that is denied me, I would not have you think me ungrateful for the measure of happiness that will still be mine. That you will let me see you, come to you, be with you, is a greater privilege than I deserve, perhaps, but I pledge my patience as proof of my appreciation. When I come back I shall have won—or I will not come back. I shall win, however, and whatever else you forget in life, you are forever to remember that between you and the world is ever and always your dear friend and true,

“JONATHAN LIVINGSTON.”

For days Virginia carried this letter next to her heart, carried it there because it so hurt and so thrilled her. The difference in their point of view made a barrier between them which tolerance, not sympathy it seemed, must bridge, and the realization of this cut deeply. But his acceptance of her decision stirred her with a passionate sense of the depth of his love and of his powerful effort to control and govern it; and she realized anew that she was putting away from her the supremest gift she could ask of life.

After a while there came another letter, dated somewhere beyond the Rockies, and telling of some fresh experiences on a ranch he had long owned but never visited, and the tone of it was as natural as if such letters were a daily matter. He had been in the saddle, save when he ate and slept, almost continually since he had reached the place, and the air and exercise had done him good.

“Every now and then,” he wrote, “something within me rebels at too much civilization, and I am compelled to get out for a breath of fresh air. I will be back in a week perhaps. My accumulated energy has been pretty well worked off and I am ready again for the requirements of society, though I’m afraid it’s only a grudging readiness. A dress-coat, after a few months, has a habit of stifling me, and yet I admit the necessity of the coat.”

There was no word of other things, only a cheerful running account of the day’s doings; but through it all Virginia read much that the others did not see, and she waited his coming with an indefinable mixture of joy and dread.

In an hour after he reached Hampstead he was at Spinstervilla, and his greeting to all was the frank and friendly one of old, and apparently the thread was taken up as if it had never been dropped. But late in the evening, when at last he found himself alone with Virginia, he turned to her and took her hands in his and looked her gravely in the face.

“It is all right,” he said quietly, after a moment of understanding silence that was dangerously sweet to both. “You have won and now you need never fear I shall forget. Until you bid me come I shall stay where you have placed me, but to-night we must say some things we could not write.”

Late they sat and talked, and once more they unreservedly bared their hearts that they might the more bravely close them again to a love they must not nourish but could not kill, and when at last he said good-night she did not withhold herself from him, for she knew his kisses were those of renunciation, not possession, and she would not deny him or herself the bitter-sweet of such a parting.

After that the naturalness of other days was resumed and his visits adjusted themselves to the basis to which they were to belong, and life at Spinstervilla moved on easily and quietly once more. The experiences of the weeks that were past had made their impress, however, and each understood that currents had been stirred that would never move again in the old way, and for a time at least each refused to look into the future which held they hardly knew what.

It was Brydon who forced them to face it after a while, and to his great delight he found in Virginia his staunchest ally. Between them they decided that Joyce should be married in October, and with an assumed masterfulness

that was trying, he so informed her. They had been talking of Mr. Livingston's return and Brydon had sighed curiously.

"This is a queer old world, Joycie," he said, turning to her rather abruptly; "and nine-tenths of its queerness is caused by women."

Joyce looked up indignantly.

"Such an Adamesque remark! I suppose in this case Virginia is entirely to blame for Mr. Livingston's marriage and its unhappy termination."

"The termination wasn't unhappy," laughed Brydon, patting her hands cheerfully. "That was the only happy thing about it. I don't suppose Virginia was to blame in this particular case, but on general principles a woman just naturally gives trouble. You've done your share yourself, my lady," and he looked at her doubtfully, then kissed her full upon her lips before she could reply.

After a while he drew a little calendar from his pocket, and striking a match, scrutinized it closely, then as he threw the match away he put the calendar back with a comical little grimace.

"One month and twenty-seven days from to-day," he said vaguely. "To-day is the sixteenth; that leaves fifteen more days in August, thirty in September, and twelve in October. Fifty-seven days in all. A regular little eternity yet."

Joyce looked at him questioningly.

“What are you talking about, Brydon? Sometimes I’m really afraid you’re losing your mind. What is fifty-seven days from to-day?”

“Your wedding day,” answered Brydon promptly. “Didn’t you know you were to be married about the twelfth of October?”

“No, I didn’t; and I’m not. Of course I’m not—why, I couldn’t. I haven’t begun to do a thing. I haven’t even bought a handkerchief,” and her face flushed warmly in the darkness of their little corner of the porch.

“Will lend you some of mine—besides, they sell handkerchiefs in London. We’ll have to get married about the twelfth, Joyce—we will really, for I’ll be in trouble if we don’t.” He brought his chair a little closer to hers.

“I intended to tell you before, but you haven’t given me a chance. I engaged passage to-day on one of the North German Lloyd ships for the twelfth of October, and it would be a pity to lose the tickets and all that—and you wouldn’t make me do it really, would you?” He moved his chair nearer still.

“You’ve engaged passage for the twelfth of October? Now I know you’ve lost your mind.” And she looked at him with doubt and dismay in every line of her face.

Brydon laughed joyously.

“I knew you’d put it off until January if I didn’t do something final, so to-day I went down and got booked for the twelfth. You’re going to agree, aren’t you, Joyce?” And this

time there was genuine anxiety lest after all she might refuse.

"But what made you do it?" she asked doubtfully, evading his question. "What on earth made you do it?"

"Couldn't help it, just had to do something—get something—begin on something. I thought first I'd go and see the minister, and then I knew he was out of town; and besides you hadn't told me whether there was any one else you would rather have; so instead I thought I'd go down and see about tickets to go somewhere. It struck me you might like to run over to London and Paris and a few other places, so I settled it then and there, and now we'll have to go really; and you don't mind, do you, dear?"

The boyish eagerness in his voice made her laugh in spite of herself.

"I think it's rather crazy, but it sounds delicious." She paused and looked at him with a dubious little pucker. "Do you mean we are going just by ourselves—just you and I?"

"People usually go that way on their bridal trips. Any objection to going just with me?"

She shook her head slowly.

"No—but I thought it would be so nice if the others could go too. Don't you think it would be nice if the others could go too, Brydon?"

"No, I don't," and his chair was given another jerk. "This little journey we're to

take by our lonesomes, and if you invite any one to join us, as the head of the family I shall recall the invitation."

Joyce laughed.

"No need to worry. Elizabeth says we're a terrible strain as it is, and I'm sure, now I think of it, no one of them would go."

Brydon tilted his chair back again.

"I guess it must be pretty trying," and he laughed also. "Elizabeth declares she keeps a little bell in her pocket ready to ring at all dark corners, but I told her not to bother, we didn't mind."

About the twelfth of October it was to be then, and rather to the surprise of all Joyce insisted that the wedding should be a very quiet one, and beyond deciding on the list of those she wished present, all other details she left for the rest to arrange.

"Who was it said women were so unexpected?" asked Elizabeth one day, putting down a piece of lawn she was hemstitching and letting her hands rest idly in her lap for a moment. "Here's Joyce, who all her life has intended, no doubt, to have a big church marriage, with orange blossoms and satin gown and bridesmaids galore, and broken-down aristocrats and a vested choir, and all the rest of the nonsense usual on such occasions, very calmly deciding, now it is time to act, that she will have nothing of the kind. Surely woman is the enigma yet unguessed."

Virginia smiled slightly.

“Oh, there’ll be some of the things. The long train and satin gown, and a few of the broken-down aristocrats. By the way, did Joyce show you Aunt Agatha’s last letter?”

Elizabeth nodded.

“I said once that I’d like that old lady to have a grand tumble, but I didn’t mean one of the kind she’s had, and I’m as sorry for her as any of you, but I don’t envy Joyce being her daughter-in-law. The old Adam in her dies hard sure. Her body is pretty badly damaged, but her nerve is as strong as ever. Her letter was an evidence of it, and she has no idea of being retired even if she can’t walk or talk, and now that she’s decided to accept Joyce, she’s going to blow her trumpet well for her.”

Virginia smiled again.

“Poor Aunt Agatha! The things of the world appeal very strongly to her, and it has been a bitter blow for Brydon to marry a pretty pauper, as she calls Joyce. Now that she sees resistance is useless, however, she has gone over with her usual disregard to any former opinions held or expressed. Since, too, she has found out that Joyce’s ancestry is a little older and more distinguished than even her own, she is getting ready to welcome her into her little world as if she were a princess who had been living in disguise for reasons of state and had just been discovered by her son.”

Elizabeth got up and put her work away carefully.

“She’s a crafty old lady—that aunt of yours, and she knows just when to trim her sails, but I wish she had written Joyce a little more mother-like letter, nevertheless.”

Virginia’s face shadowed.

“The mother-heart has never been in Aunt Agatha, and one cannot give what one does not possess. Life will not be all rose-strewn for Joyce in her new home, but if any one on earth is ever able to manage that aunt of mine, it will be Joyce. She will be good to her, but she will take no nonsense from her, and as soon as that is realized there will be no trouble I guess.”

She put down her book and went to the piano and ran her hands idly over the keys. In her eyes there was a far-away look, and Elizabeth, seeing it, went out quietly and left her alone as she began to play softly that which was continually in her heart—a song without words.

CHAPTER XXV

Nature's gift to Joyce's wedding day was a lavish outpouring of all that goes not only to make a perfect present but a beautiful memory, and for years after every detail of it stood out pitilessly in Virginia's brain.

The trees and shrubs, freshened by the showers of the day before, glowed and glistened in the sun which shone with a dazzling radiance. The air, cool and clear and crisp, was full of the mystical meaning which belongs to this season of the year and which quickens life into fresh courage and vigor; and for Joyce and Brydon, at least, the future seemed to stretch out into only happy possibilities as they stood upon its threshold before beginning together the little journey which hereafter was to be made hand-in-hand.

Inside, the house was filled with the flowers and foliage which Joyce loved best, great boxes of which had come from the old Southern home, sent by those who loved her but who could not be present. But among those who did come were her uncle, General Calvert, and his wife and daughter; and what pleased and touched her most, they had brought with them

her dear old rector. He had married her parents and had buried those whom she loved most on earth, and when in reply to Brydon's letter he had written he would gladly come, Joyce had gone away for a little while, for her eyes were wet with tears.

"It is almost next to having mother," she had whispered to Virginia; "and one does so long to have their mother on their wedding day."

From the city were a few of the friends they had made during the years of their work and study there, and who were dear to them, but most of those present were Brydon's guests; and just where to draw the line with these had been a sore struggle to all.

"But my hand is nearly ruined with hand-shaking," he had protested gloomily to Portia, "and a fellow feels like a dog when he's congratulated continually and yet knows he can't say a word about coming out. I'm my mother's son, but I'm not exclusive; and think of the presents that have been sent," and he almost groaned. "I can't understand why everybody is so confoundedly kind and wishes me such luck and happiness," he went on. "Even mother has changed and seems anxious to do something. You know of course that she has sent Joyce her entire collection of diamonds?"

Portia nodded.

"She is not going to wear them, however. She will wear no jewels save her mother's wedding pearls, which have been worn for several

generations I believe; but she appreciates this gift from your mother very much."

Brydon sighed slightly.

"Yes, I suppose it cost an effort to give them up. It is giving up at the same time all hope of ever wearing them again I imagine. She is coming to the wedding, however. She persists in risking it, and I'm afraid to oppose her."

"It may not hurt her," Portia answered. "She is easily moved, and her heart seems strangely set on coming."

They glanced at each other understandingly for a moment, and then began to talk of something else.

To no one had Brydon ever spoken of the scene with his mother on the night she was paralyzed, and only once had it been referred to between them.

For some time after her improvement had become permanent he noticed she was restless and ill at ease with him, and at last came a day when she resisted no longer, but beckoning to him made him sit beside her. After a few minutes she began to write, and then she burst into a pitiful weeping and clung to him in a passion of sobs and tears. He looked at the tablet and saw the words, "I am sorry," and he had understood instantly. He had soothed her gently and as if she were a little child, and talked to her of Joyce and of his marriage, and had asked her if she would like him to bring Joyce to see her, and she had nodded eagerly.

After that she wanted to know each day something about the wedding, and herself had written to Joyce asking her to come to her.

It was, as Elizabeth said, more a summons than a request, however, and Joyce had smiled over it; but for Brydon's sake she had gone, and from her first visit there had been a complete surrender on his mother's part to the girl whom indeed she would never call daughter, but whom she welcomed with an eagerness the others could not understand.

Only to Portia had her aunt given some idea of her former intense opposition to Brydon's choice of a wife, and of the bitterness it had caused her. But when, with one of those whimsical reactions which are sometimes peculiar to her sex, she had veered sharply in the opposite direction, she seemed to entirely forget her previous attitude, and demanded of her former followers a most cordial reception of her future daughter-in-law.

Not to be present at her son's marriage might indicate disapproval, and as she had accepted it, she was quite determined that her little world should do so too, and to go she was fully decided.

Afterwards the day seemed like a dream, a joyous dream with a minor chord vibrating through it, but whatever may have filled her heart, there was no shadow on Virginia's face.

"One's wedding day should be all beautiful,"

she had declared. "One dates everything from it afterwards, and Joyce must remember this always, always, as the most splendid of her life."

After it was over, and for years thereafter, there stood out in her mind a picture, vivid and lovely, but its every remembrance was a thrill of pain mixed strangely with a throb of joy.

Joyce was superb in her wedding gown of ivory satin. Her head was held splendidly high and straight, and her responses were as clear and firm as Brydon's; and facing them was her dear old rector, whose snow-white hair and quivering voice, and figure slightly bent, was a sharp contrast to the freshness and youth before him. Next to Brydon stood Livingston, white, but well in hand, while close to Joyce stood Virginia, holding her flowers, but feeling herself a separate, distinct creature who a few minutes before had been laughing and talking and in a few minutes more would be laughing and talking again; but in reality it was not herself who was doing this, it was somebody else—somebody else!

Just back of Joyce stood her uncle, who put her hand in Brydon's when he gave her away, and near him was his wife. Close by stood Portia and Elizabeth, and Laurie and Irving, and magnificently gowned, though in an invalid's chair, was Brydon's mother.

Grouped here and there were the friends who loved them best, and in the door-way stood

Martha and Pleasants. Somewhere in the distance there was music, which seemed to be breathing out softly the promise of faithful and true, and over and over to Virginia the minister was saying, "If any man can show just cause why they may not be lawfully joined together, let him now speak or else hereafter forever hold his peace." Why did he not go on? There was no cause why Joyce and Brydon should not be joined together.

Outside a bird was singing cheerily, splitting its little throat as if to add its share of melody to the music indoors, and then suddenly the air had grown sickening and the minister's voice had sounded far away. After a while it was over, and Joyce had her flowers again and they were crowding around her with their kisses and congratulations, and Virginia was wondering how she could get away if only for a moment, when she felt some one touch her arm, and in response to his nod she slipped off unnoticed with Livingston.

He pushed her in a chair and closed the dining-room door, then hurriedly held a glass of wine to her lips.

"It should not have been required of us," he said bitterly, looking at her anxiously. "Are you better?"

She nodded slowly.

"I'm all right. We must go back to the others."

She brushed the hair from her face absently, then shook herself impatiently.

“I’m a child,” she said. “Come—we must go back.”

The last guest had gone and quiet reigned once more in the little household, and then came Brydon’s cable. “Arrived safely—will be home for Christmas.”

CHAPTER XXVI

The more than cordial welcome which Portia's last book had received pleased her, naturally, and the future seemed to promise for her an abiding place in literature. But more and more did she shrink from the publicity which her reputation threatened to force upon her, and it was with a peculiar sense of relief that she accepted the decision of Elizabeth and Virginia to stay at Spinstervilla until after the holidays, at least.

To Livingston also this was a source of genuine pleasure. His dependence upon the home life he found there; upon the absence of the restlessness and artificiality he found so much of elsewhere was greater than he himself understood, and when his nights were spent at Hampstead, his evenings first were always given to Spinstervilla. He was true to his word, however. He did not presume upon the privilege Virginia had given him, and while in their long walks and long, quiet talks they spoke of all things else, there was one chapter in life they kept continually closed.

Virginia's interest in and knowledge of many of the things that keenly interested him had

been a source of ever-widening delight; and as the weeks went by he found himself continually turning to her in a comradeship that was stimulating to a degree he hardly dared to indulge. His love for her was absolute, but its freshness and vitality were constantly quickened by the demand she made upon his respect for her quick comprehension of many of the things he had not supposed a woman would be specially interested in or informed about; and more and more he had grown to feel the necessity of discussing with her every phase of the work into which he had plunged so determinedly in the city.

Virginia had anticipated the value of this necessity, and knowing she must give to another side of his nature the intellectual comradeship he craved only less strongly than he craved her love, she had met it by strengthening the already quick sympathy between them in taste and temperament and many points of view, by a broad and comprehensive understanding and appreciation of what interested and appealed to him particularly, and the result had been a happy one for both.

“A man who simply abuses his city, and never lifts his hand to help it, or his influence to better it, is no man—he’s a coward,” she had said one day; “and you men at the club who only smoke and sneer and shrug your shoulders ought to have your rights of citizenship taken from you.”

She had said it to Irving and Brydon, who were discussing a sensational municipal matter that was filling the papers at the time, and the discussion had led her into saying much that showed a broader and deeper knowledge of such subjects than Livingston had imagined she possessed. Not for some time afterwards did he understand how she had been led into the study of these subjects, and his discovery surprised him greatly.

He had noticed in the library a small but exceedingly well-selected collection of books bearing on Economics and Sociology, and one day, opening one, he found written within, "To Virginia from Robert Stone." He put it down and opened another, and another, and in each were the same words written.

He knew Stone well; knew him also as one of the rising political economists of the day, but that Virginia knew him he had never heard. The perplexed look on his face as he held one of the books amused her and she held out her hand.

"Which is it?" she asked. "Oh, one of Robert's own. I never told you about Robert, did I?"

Livingston shook his head.

"I did not know you knew him. He's the most promising and practical man in his line to-day. Did he give you all of these?" and he swept his hand over the entire shelf.

"Every one, and I value them more than any of my books because he taught me how to un-

derstand them. His youngest sister and I were classmates at college," she explained, "and several times I visited her during the holidays or vacations, and though Robert was years older than I, he was lovely to me, and we have been good friends, notwithstanding—"

She stopped abruptly, and her face flushed red and warm, and Livingston seeing it looked at her gravely.

"Was he in love with you?"

She put down the book in her hand and began to look carefully for another.

"That isn't exactly a fair question, is it?" and the color died slowly out of her face.

"I beg your pardon," he answered quickly; "I should not have asked it."

She handed him the book for which she had been looking.

"That is my dear friend," and she touched it almost lovingly. "I was always, even as a child, fond of the things it tells about, and Robert found it out one day and told me what to read, and gave me the books you see here. He would talk to me about his own views concerning them, and then later, as I grew older and began to observe life in all its phases more closely, and saw how splendidly great and how pitifully weak humanity was, I found myself theorizing too much, and doing too little and knowing too little at first hand, and then it was I began to go in and out among the poor. What I learned then was more valuable than

anything I have ever learned in books, and while I still go back to them for the pleasure and help they give me, I know the problems that are vexing the world to-day will never be solved by pen and ink. They must be solved by men and women—and the grace of God.”

Livingston looked at her curiously. She had always been to him the most perfect embodiment of the womanly woman he had ever seen, the most intensely refined and high-bred in looks and bearing, and yet he knew few men whose views were so advanced and whose opinions so well formed on all the social, industrial, religious and political questions of the day as were hers. This side of her nature he had not found out at once. She rarely showed it unless the occasion justified it, and she rarely talked about the things which most interested her except with some one who felt that they were as vitally important as she did, and who took them as seriously, and yet with temperate judgment and a saving sense of humor.

That she had been trained, or rather her natural taste developed, by another man, and such a man as Robert Stone, was a discovery by no means to Livingston's liking. Ever since he had realized the fullness of his love for Virginia he had been conscious that he was strongly jealous of all that had previously filled her life. And though it was a weakness for which he hated himself, he nevertheless had not yet been able to conquer it altogether, and the

knowledge that she knew it sometimes surged over him, though he apparently gave no sign.

He knew Stone well; had met him frequently abroad, and the memory of a conversation they had had together one night on the deck of their ship as they were crossing the Mediterranean came over him sharply. Had Stone meant Virginia when he said what he did?

He put the book down on the table, then came over to the mantel, and leaning against it looked at her intently.

"It is queer you have never mentioned Stone to me," he said slowly. "I know him very well and admire no man more."

Virginia turned in surprise.

"You really know Robert?" she asked in amazement; "and have never told me before?"

They looked at each other and then both laughed.

"If you know him you'll be interested in the letter I had from him yesterday," and this time the color in Virginia's face deepened into a happy flush. "He is to be married next month to a girl he's known all his life, and I am just as delighted to know it as the girl herself, I guess, for no one deserves happiness more than Robert."

Livingston's forehead wrinkled a little skeptically.

"I hope he'll get it, but these discoveries of love after years of friendship are apt to be tame." He held out his hand to say good-

night. "Love comes so differently, however," he continued after a moment's pause, "that one cannot judge its effect or influence on another. To some it is a gradual awakening, to others an instant recognition. I think I prefer the latter. Good-night."

November came in beautifully. Clear and cold and bracing, the air was a tonic to mind and body and sent the blood in joyous thrills through veins and heart. No two trees were alike in their gorgeous garments of flaming yellow and sober brown, of rich reds and dull greens, and each seemed anxious to flaunt its glory before being overcome by relentless winter. The earth was hardening and the hedges dropping their drapery, and the sky at sunset broke daily into a constantly changing brilliance before it faded into darkness, and to Virginia it was all wonderful and beautiful. Suddenly the sky clouded, however, and the wind blew shrill and high and the leaves shivered and fell under the blight of frost, and she knew the summer was ended, the season over.

Bravely she tried to put from her the bitterness it had brought and to remember only its dear brightness, but it was no easy thing to do. The days that were gone had made a sharp dividing line in her life, and henceforth it could never be the same again. She did not let herself think of a future. In her heart she called herself one of the children of Israel, and tried

to believe she could live day by day and not dream of the years that might or might not be; but no one, not even Portia or Livingston, knew how fierce was the fight or how bitter the pain that sometimes swept over her.

For some little time past a new fear had been troubling her also; a fear almost intangible, and yet that threatened to grow into all sorts of possibilities. Several times since Brydon's marriage she had received copies of papers with certain articles marked in them, and the articles always had reference to Livingston's former wife. She had never mentioned these articles to Livingston—to have done so would not have been wise, for while he refused to in any way recognize her existence and was indifferent to her actions in regard to himself, he would have tolerated nothing that might in the least annoy Virginia, and knowing this, she very quietly burned the papers received and spoke to no one of them.

That Mrs. Grey was leading a gay and brilliant life in the city, she knew very well; and knew also that among a certain set she was fast becoming the toast of the town, but in a strange way she learned some other things about her, and from a source as unexpected as it was authentic.

For several years it had been her habit to visit, during the winter, a certain hospital, and when possible sing for some of the patients, and it was during one of these visits that she heard

her name called softly as she was passing a bed in one of the wards. She stopped, and the girl lying upon it held her hand out feebly.

“Are you the Miss Deming—Miss Virginia Deming—Mrs. Grey hates so?” she whispered tremblingly and with a look of terror in her eyes as she asked the question. “Are you the one?”

Virginia smiled slightly.

“I am Virginia Deming,” she answered; “but I did not know that Mrs. Grey hated me.”

The sick girl pulled her down closer to the bed.

“Well, she does; she hates you so she would like to see you dead. I know you think I’m out of my head to be telling you this, but I’m not. I’ve seen you before, and I want to warn you. Don’t have anything to do with her—she’s a devil, a beautiful devil, and I wish to God she were dead herself!”

The girl began to cry hysterically, and Virginia, forgetting what had been told her in her effort to quiet her, learned that she was, or had been before her illness, Mrs. Grey’s maid, and learned also that she was smarting under the sense of injury and neglect and indifference which had been shown her by her former mistress since she had been at the hospital, and that her heart was very bitter toward her.

She would let her talk but little that afternoon, but on subsequent visits she learned much that she had never known before, and what she

learned did not add to her peace of mind regarding the stand she had taken toward Livingston.

"I was with her when she married Mr. Livingston," the girl Charlotte told her. "And it was on account of me that they had their first quarrel. It was on the ship going over. Mrs. Grey got mad because I couldn't find something she wanted, and she cursed me for being so stupid. Mr. Livingston reproved her and she answered him back sharp, and for a few minutes there were hot words, and he left the room, and she had to apologize to me before he would make up with her again.

"She thought at first because he had married her that she could twist him like the rest, but she soon found out she was wrong. He stuck by his bargain as faithful as any human being could be expected to, but it was hell to him, and when she persisted in doing what he told her must stop, he quit, and God in heaven couldn't blame him for doing it.

"It nearly set her crazy, his leaving her. She didn't believe it for some time, and then when she failed to bring him back there were scenes on scenes. He was the only man she had ever known that she was afraid of, and she loved him too. I don't believe he ever thought she loved him, but she did. She loved him like a tigress, and she has always been as jealous as a cat of him. Hers wasn't a good love though. She wanted to conquer him, and make him

adore her, as some of the other men had said they did; but he wasn't a man to talk about eye-brows and lips and beautiful hair all the time, and she didn't know how to talk about anything but body things, and she saw her mistake when it was too late.

"She isn't always a wicked woman. She's kind-hearted and generous when the mood is on her, and she never really cares for men except to flatter and admire and wait on her. She knows, too, just how far to go; but at that time she thought she could do just as she pleased, and she wanted to be considered the most beautiful woman in Paris, and the best gowned; and she wanted to lead everything and everybody, and if you got in her way she would step on you sure."

The sick girl turned on her side and looked up into Virginia's face intently.

"Mrs. Grey knows he loves you," she said after a moment, "and she hates you worse than the Devil hates a monk. When she heard Mr. Livingston had come back to this country she was as restless as the wind to get here too. She always kept up with him somehow, and as long as he stayed in any of the foreign countries, traveling or hunting, or writing, she didn't seem to mind so much; but she was afraid he would marry if he came back here, and he hadn't been back two months before she was here also. She soon found out about you, and when she learned you were sick, she locked the

nurse up and took her clothes. I was sorry for you, for I didn't know what she might do if the notion struck her."

"But why did she get the divorce from Mr. Livingston?" interrupted Virginia, ignoring the reference to her sickness. "If she loved him, why did she bring suit for divorce?"

"I never did understand exactly," the girl answered, nervously brushing a wisp of hair from her eyes. "I think it was pique or anger perhaps. She waited three years, and as she never heard from him except through his lawyers, I think she got in one of her mad spells, and thought she would show her independence. In her heart she didn't think he would agree to it, but would come back to her; and when he didn't and said he would give in addition to his settlement a large sum of money if she would take her maiden name, she made the air hot. Even her mother couldn't stand her that day. She pretended that she got the divorce to marry somebody else, but I don't believe she ever meant it for a moment. She knew too well that would kill all chance of her ever getting at Mr. Livingston again, and that's what she wants—the only thing she can't get."

Virginia's hand was resting on the bed, and the sick girl touched it timidly with her fingers and then pressed it with swift eagerness.

"If he really loves you," she cried in a low tone, though her voice was trembling with excitement, "keep him from her. Don't let him

ever go back. She has a way of tricking men, of making them lose their heads, and she is determined to conquer him yet. He was kind to me when every one else was cruel, and I wanted to warn him, but I didn't know what to do."

The girl was shaking as if with a chill, and Virginia, seeing she was strangely wrought up, leaned over her and quieted her gently, rubbing the cold, trembling hands in her warm ones and smoothing the tumbled hair softly until she was herself again. And then she told her it would all be right, that Mr. Livingston would never go back, and that Mrs. Grey would realize after a while the foolishness of trying to make him do so.

"But you do not know her," protested the girl, still holding Virginia's hands tightly. "You do not know her. I've lived with her for nine years, and slaved for her, and she's let me lie here like a dog, and never once remembered I am still living. She paid me well and I stayed on because I had an old mother to provide for; but mother is dead now, and I will never go back to her—never, never!"

The girl began to shiver again, and Virginia, seeing there was a deep bitterness in her heart against her former mistress, began to talk of something else; of Spinstervilla, and how they had been looking for some one to come out and do some sewing for them; and how when she was well and strong again it would be just the

place for her. And the sick girl, listening with straining eyes and quivering lips, thrilled with sudden warmth, for she knew the sewing was only a pretext, and that Virginia was holding out the hope of rest and quiet, of air and sunshine, and what most of all she needed, the strong, human interest of some one who believed she was made of flesh and blood and had a heart in her bosom, even though she was but a lady's maid.

CHAPTER XXVII

The spirit of Christmas was in bone and blood and air, and at Spinstervilla it was being most energetically cultivated.

"The only time I wish I were the mother of a dozen children is at Christmas," said Elizabeth, measuring a piece of pink muslin and then reaching out to get a doll from the number by which she was surrounded. "When I get rich I am going to borrow an orphan asylum some Christmas and keep it for a week, then return it, and go South to recuperate."

Portia laughed slightly.

"If you and Virginia continue to discover new cases, you'll have to employ some one besides Charlotte to help you get ready for them."

"And you?—you do more than Virginia and myself together, only you keep quiet about it."

Portia shook her head protestingly.

"You are mistaken, dear; but did Virginia show you the check received this morning from Joyce for the children?"

Elizabeth nodded, her mouth full of pins, which she took out one by one.

"Indeed she did," she answered as soon as she could speak. "Bless her dear old heart!"

Thus far her riches haven't spoiled her. It was such a nice fat check too. We're going to use it for the day out here."

"It's a great work you're undertaking. Are you sure you can get it through?"

"Sure. We won't bring but fifty, though I'd like to make it five hundred. Mr. Livingston is to furnish the sleighs and take them on a grand sleigh-ride. We're to furnish the dinner, and Joyce's check is to bring them out and buy something nice for each to be put on the tree. She'll be here, you know, and it will be as jolly for us as the children."

"Have you decided on the children?" and Portia, who was also busily sewing on the dolls' garments, reached out for more muslin. "And do you think you can limit the number to fifty? You must not forget the Pettigrew boys, or Mrs. Cannister's grandchildren, and the three little Milligans."

Elizabeth's face wrinkled.

"We haven't one of those on the list," and she whistled softly. "I know there'll be trouble in keeping the number down, and Virginia isn't going to listen to dropping a single one. Poor little imps! Those who have heard about it are so crazy with delight that I'm afraid half of the East Side will expect to come out with them. I don't see how we can manage more than fifty, but I won't be at all surprised if twice that number get here. Well, it's the Christ Child's day, and we'll just have to do the best

we can," and Elizabeth, getting up, dropped her work to call Charlotte to bring her more tarletan and ribbons and lace; and Portia, glancing at her, saw her face was full of the mother-look that belongs to womanhood and that comes from the mother-heart within, and she sighed slightly.

It had been Virginia's idea to give the children a day at Spinstervilla, with a sleigh-ride, a dinner, and a Christmas-tree by way of entertainment, and Elizabeth and Portia had agreed so readily that the Christmas spirit had proved infectious, and Livingston and the boys, as Portia always called Laurie and Irving, felt themselves filled with something of the old Christmas thrill that they had thought was forever dead.

Joyce and Brydon would be home in a few days, and on the 24th they were to come out to Spinstervilla and stay until the 28th, and in consequence of this there was much bustle and preparation and excitement in getting the house in holiday attire, not only in honor of the season, but of the travelers' return as well.

"Everything must be just beautiful," Virginia had declared, "and warm and bright and welcoming, for it is so nice to have a fuss made over you when you get back home." And under her direction they had worked untiringly to make the house as bright and attractive as possible, and the result was satisfactory to all.

From the old home in Virginia had come barrels of holly laden with rich red berries; and

running cedar and mistletoe, and sweet, fragrant pine, and in each room were the Christmas decorations of the days when all the family and all its connections and friends would gather for their Christmas greetings, and drink to the memory of the year that was past, and touch glasses lightly to the one that was before them.

Virginia had been a child of twelve when she had left the old home and the old life, but her most impressionable years had been spent in it, and deep in her heart was an undying love for every remembrance of it. Now that there was a chance to have a real Christmas she had decided on its being somewhat after those which had made her young life so beautifully happy, and when she stood, one day, knee deep in pine and holly and cedar, she hugged it to her heart in sheer delight at its beauty, and as no one was by, kissed it over and over again.

"We are to hang up our stockings on the chimney-piece in the hall," she had told Irving, "and I want a nice, big stocking like I used to have; but I want a sure-enough stocking, not one of those fancy things they make for children now-a-days."

Irving had laughed and called her a baby, but the next time he came out he brought a good-sized package, and throwing it at her said he hoped they would suit, and her ringing laughter on opening it had brought the others quickly to see what was the matter.

She held up the unshapely white things in her hand, and at the sight of them Elizabeth

dropped in a chair and held out her hands to get one.

“Legs of the long departed!” she cried triumphantly. “Irving, you’re a credit to antiquarianism and a rebuke to the spirit of the age; but where on earth did you find them?” and she held one out at arm’s length joyously.

“What’s the matter with ’em?” he asked, standing with his hands in his pockets and looking at first one and then the other as if indignant. “Virginia said she wanted a sure-enough stocking, big and deep, and when I saw these I took all the girl had.”

He took up one and looked at it critically.

“If they weren’t bran-new I’d declare they belonged to Aunt Rebecca. Remember Aunt Rebecca, Portia? She was the fattest woman out of a show I ever saw, and when we were boys Joe and I used to ride twelve miles to get three of her stockings to hang up at Christmas—one for Edith, one for him and one for myself, and she always gave us old ones with holes in the toes.”

He poked his hand into the foot of the stocking he held, and ran his fingers down to the toe cautiously, then looked at it almost lovingly.

“Daisy, ain’t it? I’ve been in a dozen shops since I was out here last, trying to get some stockings like Aunt Rebecca’s, and when I found these I nearly gave the girl a fit. I scooped ’em up and said I’d take the whole bunch; walked off too and forgot my change, so

they came pretty high after all, even if they aren't the latest style."

He took up one pair after another and laid them out in a row.

"Pretty ghastly, but Aunt Rebecca never wore a black one in her life, and somehow black ones didn't seem to fit. But where are you going to hang them? Have you chosen any particular spot yet, my lady?" and he took Virginia by the shoulders and pushed her over to the old-fashioned mantel-piece. "Choose first, as you are the youngest; then Elizabeth, then Portia. I suppose Joyce and Brydon won't care to have their stockings separated, so they'll have to take this end over here. As usual we men will have the leavings."

Virginia's eyes swept the mantel shelf quickly.

"Elizabeth must have the middle," she said presently, measuring distances. "Portia will be on one side and I on the other. Joyce next to me and Brydon next to Portia, that makes five; then Laurie's and Mr. Livingston's and yours, and then"—she looked at Portia a little doubtfully—"and then Aunt Agatha's—that makes nine exactly."

Irving gave a long whistle.

"Do you mean Mrs. Field is to be here too?" he asked, taking out his note-book and pencil. "And how did it happen, may I inquire?"

Portia smiled in spite of an effort not to do so.

"I had a pitiful little note from her yesterday, asking me if she couldn't come too, just for a day or so, as it would be so lonely in her big house with nobody in it but servants. Of course I wrote her to come."

Irving ran his hand cautiously over her back. I'm terribly afraid you aren't human, but nothing has happened yet. It's jolly good of you to let her come, however, after her beastly treatment all these years, but I guess it would be pretty tough to be by one's lonesome at a time like this. After all, it's Christmas, and God knows a lonely Christmas is bad enough for a man—much less a woman."

He took up his pencil and note-book and began to scribble hastily. He was ashamed of himself, but his eyes were blurred. There had been several lonely Christmases for him since he had left his old home, and before he had discovered Portia in New York, and the prospect of this one had made him boyishly happy for days past.

"There," he said, trying to speak gaily; "there are our names. Give me some pins, Elizabeth, and I'll fix these up now so there'll be no fighting for places at the last minute. Remember how we used to row over them when we were kids, Virginia? You were pretty small, but no one who ever saw Edith at Christmas would ever forget her. She used to choose her place a month ahead, and I've had many a fight with Joe because he would hang his stock-

ing in a different place every night. Just think! Edith's got two babies of her own now, and has been in California six years."

He stepped back and surveyed the bits of paper critically.

"That looks something like, and I hope the Honorable S. Claus won't have any difficulty in making out who's who."

"But you haven't written Charlotte's name, nor Martha's, nor Pleasants's," said Virginia. "It would break their hearts to be left out. Put theirs around this end."

"Sure," and Irving bowed low—"sure, any more?"

"Plenty, but space prevents," and she threw him a kiss. "And now come help me finish the dining-room. Some more holly came to-day, and it's even 'more redder,' Pleasants says, than the first lot."

Christmas Eve dawned clear and cold, and dazzlingly white. For two days past it had snowed heavily, and when on the third day the sun came out again all nature was proudly resplendent in garments too gorgeous save for its own offspring. A thin crust had formed upon the snow-covered ground and glazed the burdened branches of the trees with flashing crystals, and the cold, crisp air sent the blood in splendid surges through the body.

Inside the house the sun poured itself lavishly in every spot and corner, and in the deep fire-

places the logs crackled and sputtered and flared up bravely in cheery warmth and greeting, while the Christmas greens lent perfume as well as color to the beautifully dressed rooms; and the Christmas spirit was in the heart of each.

Joyce and Brydon had come, and like a child Joyce had run from room to room and eagerly, lovingly had searched each familiar spot to see if everything was as it had been left.

"I was so dreadfully afraid something would be changed," she said after a first hasty survey had been made. "Oh, Portia, Portia! it's so good to be home again—so good!" and she hugged Portia to her heart as if she would squeeze the breath out of her body.

"It has been but a little over two months since we went away, but we have seen so much that is great and wonderful and beautiful that we almost got tired of it, and I wouldn't give this dear old-maid house for every palace in Europe—indeed I wouldn't, and I am not crazy either. This is home and those other places are just huge houses."

"And you've fixed everything so beautifully, too," she went on without pausing to take a good breath. "And it's so warm and bright and sunshiny that I could just cry like an idiot and have a splendid time doing it, if Brydon wouldn't say I was a goose," and Joyce wiped her eyes and rubbed her cheeks in a tearful excess of happiness that was contagious, and at sight of which the men had very promptly walked away.

It was such a happy Christmas! Pleasants was well nigh popping with importance and pomposity at Brydon's frequent whispered conferences concerning the exact proportions of that Southern seductive mystery called eggnog, while Martha was sternly dignified over the unnecessarily lavish supply of Christmas good things that for weeks past she had been making.

"'Tain't human to be scrimptious at Christmas times," she had said when Portia had mildly suggested a slight reduction in quantity as regarded her various preparations. "'Tain't the way you been brought up to take notice of the number of cakes an' pies an' jelly an' blay-monges an' things w'at's bein' made; an' yo' Pa an' yo' Ma wouldn't like it ef they know'd 'twarn't bein' done as usual."

"But there are not so many as there used to be," Portia had protested; "and it's sinful to waste things, Martha."

"Was'e 'em? Who's goin' to was'e 'em? How you know how many of 'em there's goin' to be? When a carriage-load of people rides up and stays to dinner and supper—w'at you goin' to do with 'em, an' how 'bout them waiters?—takes a powerful lot to 'low fer waiters."

Portia tried to hide a smile behind her handkerchief.

"But people up here don't send waiters to each other at Christmas, Martha. That was an old Southern custom, and it isn't the fashion

up here, and they don't ride up in carriages and stay to dinner and supper unless they are invited."

Martha dropped down in her chair and rolled her arms up in her apron.

"Go way, Miss Portia—you jes' tryin' to plague me. Whoever hearn tell of a place w'at didn't send their compliments an' fruit cake an' jelly an' things to one anodder at Christmas? This heah ain't no heathen country. You tell me ain't none of them folks w'at lives in these big places round heah goin' to send you no waiters?—an' you Marse Deming's darter! Go long, Miss Portia! I jus' want to show these w'ite folks up heah w'at we kin do. Don't you feel no oneasiness 'bout yo' waiters. I know what's spected of quality an' what you been used to, an' you ain't agoin' to feel no shame 'bout yo' cakes an' things," and Portia was dismissed from the kitchen by a wave of the hand.

When the sick girl Charlotte, whom Virginia had discovered in the hospital, was able to leave the latter, she was brought to Spinstervilla; and when she realized she was to stay there until she was well and strong again, her delight had been almost pitiful. A sewing-girl was needed, they had said, and in order to make her feel as if at work, she had been given some simple sewing to do; but she understood the sewing was a pretext to help her to health and strength again, and her devotion to each became absolute from the first.

Her interest in the Christmas preparations, and the home-coming of the one she did not know, was childishly intense, and her happiness in being in such surroundings showed itself continually in her untiring efforts to be of use; and when Mr. Livingston shook hands with her kindly and called her by name, she had flushed with a warm color that had made her plain face almost pretty.

“Some of these days,” she had whispered to Virginia that night, “some of these days when you need a maid of your own, you will let me be it, won’t you, Miss Virginia?” And Virginia had promised that if ever a maid was needed she should be the same, and Charlotte had gone to bed content that some of these days she would live forever with Virginia.

Laurie and Irving were Livingston’s guests, and when on Christmas Eve their sleigh-bells were heard outside there was as merry a rush to greet them as if they had not been seen for weeks—and such a jolly, happy time there was that night!

After supper—after Martha’s most delicious supper—mysterious-looking bundles and boxes began suddenly to appear, and such whisperings, and cornerings; such guessing and feeling and thumping of packages, and such queer-shaped things as the stockings were when filled and hung in place, had surely never been seen before.

Brydon was boyishly happy.

"I don't believe I will sleep a wink to-night, wondering what on earth Joyce has finally decided to give me. She bought a new thing in every new place she went to in Europe, and for a day or so she would keep it a secret, then she would show it to me and decide to give it to some one else, and now she says her last purchase has been put in this," and Brydon touched with his foot a large wooden box upon which his name was written in big letters. "I think it's a gas stove, or a typewriter, or a family Bible," he went on. "But if anybody can give me an idea, I'll have a better night's rest, I imagine."

Joyce laughed joyously.

"I hope you won't sleep a wink for getting such unguessable-looking things for me. What do you reckon this is, Virginia?" and she lifted a box and shook it lightly.

"Put it down quick, it might break," and Brydon took it out of her hands and put it among things marked with her name.

"Break! Now I know it's lace," and Joyce turned to Portia to help her with a fresh relay of bundles that had just been brought in.

All through the hall, on chairs and sofas and tables and floor, were bundles and boxes of every imaginable shape and size and style, and late into the night they assorted and put in separate piles those for whom each was intended.

"Virginia always had the big sofa when she was a child, and she might as well take it to-

night, for I don't know what to do with all the things with her name on them," and Portia looked as helplessly at Elizabeth as if she were in trouble.

Elizabeth laughed.

"Bring over the sofa, Brydon, you and Irving, and put it close to the wall. There, that will be Virginia's place, and all her things can go on it. Portia can take that big table and I'll take this chair. You and Joyce can have that corner all by your loving selves," and she gave Brydon a slight push in the direction indicated. "Irving can have that chair, and Laurie this, and Mr. Livingston the table opposite Joyce. Mrs. Field must have the table near her, and Charlotte's things can go on the book shelves; and Pleasants's and Martha's"—she stopped perplexed. "If any more bundles have their names on them they'll have to be burnt up. They've enough here now to make them crazy until next Christmas, and if we come across any more they will have to take them to-night or never see them."

"'Tain't no trouble 'bout takin' 'em to-night, Miss Elizabeth," they heard a chuckling voice say, and turning saw Pleasants standing in the doorway with a huge bowl of foaming egg-nog in his hands, while behind him was Martha holding an old-fashioned silver tray upon which was an immense fruit cake. Instantly every bundle was dropped and there was a great clapping of hands, and in a moment Portia had

the ladle, and the first glass was carried by Brydon to his mother.

All through the merry chatter of the evening, with its utter abandonment of restraint and its fresh enjoyment of the simple, wholesome pleasures of the season, she had sat an interested spectator. The cold and haughty look of other days had somehow slipped away, and she was a woman again, with a woman's human interest in those things which make life pure and sweet, and as Brydon brought her the glass of egg-nog, the first she had seen in many years, her hand shook slightly, but her eyes were filled with a light he had never seen in them before.

"Is it all right, mother?" he asked, and when she nodded he stooped over and gave her a kiss and patted her hands tenderly, and then went back to the table, where Portia was still busily filling the glasses.

"May you live long and prosper," he said, holding up his glass and touching lightly those of the others—"you and all your family!" He took a deep draught. "By George, but this is a dandy! Pleasants, you're a poet and ought to go in the hall of fame! Just a little bit more, Portia—there, that will do. What! you're going to take some more too, Joyce?—surprised at you! Fill up there, John and Irving. Laurie, I'm rather afraid of you, my boy. You weren't raised on this, and it's powerfully seductive—nothing more insidious except apple-toddy. Just think of the apple-toddy

and egg-nog they're drinking in Virginia to-night!"

Virginia raised her glass quickly.

"Drink, all of you!" she cried, "to Virginia—the dear Mother State! May her children never forget that her honor is in their keeping!" She touched her glass to her lips as the others raised theirs, then put it down hurriedly and walked over to her aunt.

Not a bundle was unwrapped that night, but before light the next morning the entire household was awakened by the blowing of horns, the ringing of bells, and the popping of crackers; and looking out they saw Livingston and Laurie and Irving, in the snow, and pounding each other with snow-balls as if they were boys of ten.

"This is Irving's doings," shouted Laurie, moulding a good-sized ball and throwing it at Brydon, whose head was poked out of the window to see what was the matter. "He's had us awake since four o'clock, and we had to come over to save his reason. Hurry up there and come out and we'll give you an appetite for a Christmas gift."

Such a scurrying there was to get dressed, and such a jolly breakfast, to which all came holding their stockings in their hands. "I'm starving, but I couldn't even eat one of Martha's pop-overs until I empty this old lady," and Brydon held his stocking up by the toe and began to shake out its contents.

"That isn't the way," cried Joyce, trying to stop him. "You must take out each thing separately—see?" and she began to pull hers out slowly one by one.

"Takes too long that way," and Brydon dumped the contents of his in Joyce's lap.

Surely their laughter must have been heard a good distance off, for the surprises of each package caused fresh peals, and Pleasants was finally so overcome that he had to retire and shake in the kitchen, while Charlotte was called in to take his place.

After breakfast came the unwrapping of bundles and boxes, and this time the laughter was almost turned into tears as each revealed some evidence of thought and love, or some remembrance of a particular desire; and for a while everybody was chokingly happy and trying hard to talk naturally.

"But you've given us so many things, Mr. Livingston," said Elizabeth—"not just one thing; and such beautiful ones. I believe I have four different boxes with your card in each. "You really oughtn't—"

Livingston put out his hand protestingly.

"Please don't; this is the first real Christmas I've had for many years—surely you would not begrudge the pleasure it has given me?"

"Not a bit of it," she said frankly, "and I only wish I could give you what you most want on earth. It's worth waiting for, however,"—

her voice was very gentle,—“and some day I pray God it may be yours.”

“You mean—?” he asked, turning to her with a flash of sudden hope in his eyes.

“I mean when it is right that it should be,” she said quietly. “Come—Brydon is calling us, I think.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

The children had gone and quiet again reigned at Spinstervilla. "Centre rush was nothing to it," Brydon had declared; "but they were a jolly lot of little devils, and their 'stomicks,' as one of them said, were so full there wasn't a wrinkle left. A red-head youngster confided that to me as a happy secret, and I thought of brandy and soda, but he seemed such a cheerful little pig I concluded he didn't need treatment."

The limit of fifty had been so upset by the wails of the disappointed who were not included, and the appeals of those who were, that it had turned out as Elizabeth had predicted, and over one hundred little Arabs on the morning of the 27th had been piled into the sleighs which Livingston had provided, and been warmly tucked under fur robes with feet to hot bricks, and taken for a ride.

Over the snow they flew and found themselves of a sudden in a wonderland of beauty and marvelous sights, and from the ride they had been brought into the cheerful warmth and brightness of Spinstervilla, and had sat down to a dinner that was to live forever in memory.

How they had stuffed their little stomachs, and how the ladies and gentlemen had waited on them! And then the Christmas-tree! Such a great, big, splendid tree it was, with something pretty and something useful for each one, and the cakes and candy and nuts and fruit that they were to take back with them!—It was all like a beautiful dream.

Just before they started for home, Virginia felt her sleeve pulled timidly, and turning saw a little lame fellow, whom she had found some months before at a hospital, looking up into her face.

“Whose birthday did you say it was?” he asked softly, and she could hardly hear his voice in the shouts and noise made by the other children. “Whose birthday did you say it was?”

“The Christ Child’s,” she answered gently. “And He is so glad you have had such a happy time to-day, Jakey dear,” and she drew him closer as she spoke.

He shook his head slowly, still looking with his strange, earnest gaze into her face.

“I have had the best time I ever had in my life,” he answered quietly; “but He don’t know me. He ain’t never even heard of me, I guess. I’m just lame Jakey,” and he sighed a queer little sigh and looked shyly again into her face. “I wish you would tell Him, though, I’ve had an awful good time, and I’m ever so much obliged.”

It was a very tired and happy household that went to bed that night at Spinstervilla, but when in the morning Joyce and Brydon left to go back to their city home, Joyce wept copiously and clung to each one as if she were leaving for life.

"I didn't mind it at first so much," she sobbed half comically, "for that was just taking a trip with Brydon and I knew I was coming back for Christmas, but it will never be the same again, never. You all will make company of us, and Martha will think she is bound to make something specially good, and—"

"That I will, honey; that I will," broke in Martha, who was standing in the doorway waiting to say good-by. "Don't you think old Marthy ain't a-goin' to give you the best what she can make whenever you come out, for she ever are," and with a groaning kind of cry Martha threw her apron over her head and disappeared without further farewells.

For the rest of the day there was a terribly let-down feeling over the entire household. The excitement of the season was over and the reaction, which is almost as much to be dreaded as the pleasure is to be anticipated, had settled upon all.

In the library Portia was busy at her desk writing notes of thanks for her many remembrances, and Elizabeth, who hated with a deadly hatred to write a letter, had locked herself in her room to struggle over hers with

dogged persistency until the last one was finished; but Virginia was in no mood for writing. An unaccountable restlessness was upon her, and a sense of impending possibilities thrilled her with an anxiety she could not explain or understand. On the morrow Charlotte, the former maid of Mrs. Grey, was to leave them. A new maid was needed at Hampstead and Livingston had sent his housekeeper over to see if Charlotte could not fill the place. The delight of the latter in being in Livingston's employ, and the prospect of seeing Virginia occasionally, had filled her with a childish happiness, and for the first time since she had left the hospital her face was entirely free from its haunting look of anxiety.

Since she had been at Spinstervilla she had received several letters from Mrs. Grey. These letters had been sent to the hospital and from there forwarded, through the kindness of one of the nurses, who had been bound to secrecy should Mrs. Grey inquire for her former maid's address. As they had never been answered they had gradually become less frequent, and Charlotte had begun to breathe freely again at the thought of having seen the last of her one-time mistress. At first these letters had been heartlessly selfish. How long did she intend to stay sick? It was time she was back at work. A little later they were slightly conciliatory. She hoped she was now better and would come back at once. Later still they were angrily impatient.

“You must leave the hospital immediately. The doctors are fooling you. You are not really ill. My clothes are going to ruin, the new maid is a fool,” and finally a wail of appeal: “I am ill myself, you must come back to me—no one knows what to do for me as you do.”

These letters Charlotte took to Virginia, who advised her to burn them and take no notice of them. It had been distinctly understood when Charlotte left Mrs. Grey that she would not return to her, and the latter had let her go believing she was too sick to be of future use; but when she realized the incompetency of her new maids, she chose to forget that her former relationship was a thing of the past and demanded her return. Virginia, knowing this, advised her to in no way notice her letters or have any communication with her, with the result that the strained look in Charlotte’s face had gradually given way to one of peace and content, and a merry laugh was sometimes heard from her.

The day dragged slowly away. A cold, drizzling rain that turned into sleet as it fell added to its cheerlessness, and just as darkness was settling over the earth and sky Virginia, who had gone to the porch for a moment to see if there were any signs of clearing weather, saw a boy from the village trudging rapidly up the path that led to the house. He saw her standing in the door, and waving her to stop

ran up the steps two at a time. "It's for you, Miss Virginia, and I brought it up at once without waiting for the horse." He handed her a telegram as he spoke and clapped his hands together to warm his finger tips, which were tingling with cold, and looked at her inquiringly. "Ain't nothing wrong, I hope?"

Virginia took the yellow envelope which he handed her, and the blood surged thickly through her heart.

Was it Livingston?—or Joyce or Brydon?—or Aunt Ann?—or George? All day she had felt that something was going to happen. She held the paper limply for a moment and waited for her heart to stop its rapid beating. It could not be Mr. Livingston, he was at Hampstead. Brydon would have 'phoned had anything been wrong. Were it about Aunt Ann, Portia would have received the message. It was from George, no doubt. He was probably on leave of absence and was coming to see them. With a sense of relief she tore the envelope open and began to read.

"Come to me at once. I am dying. I must see you. In God's name, come!

"MARGARET GREY."

The paper fluttered out of her hand and the boy, stooping over, picked it up and handed it to her again. "Ain't nothing wrong, I hope, Miss Virginia. Ain't nobody dead, is it?"

His words recalled her to herself. She

opened the door and motioned him to go inside. "No, no one is dead," she answered mechanically. "Go in and get warm. I will send a message in a moment." The boy walked in quickly and went over to the fire and held his hands out to the cheerful blaze. It was an awful pretty place and he hoped Miss Virginia wouldn't be in a hurry with the return message. For a while he sat in silence looking intently at every object in the hall, then he saw the girl Charlotte go over to the 'phone and nervously ring up somebody. It was the city connection she wanted and it was a doctor she was talking to. "Was Mrs. Grey really ill?" she asked. "Would she die? Was it one of her heart attacks?" He didn't know what the answers were, but the woman seemed terribly excited, and the boy watching her knew that something was wrong and that the message he had brought meant trouble.

After a while Virginia came out into the hall, and though quiet, a red spot burned in each cheek and her lips were twitching painfully. "There is no return message, Billy," she said, going over to the boy and putting her hand on his shoulder, "so there is no need for you to hurry back. Go in and tell Martha I say to give you something nice and hot for supper," and before he could thank her she had disappeared again.

When first she had left him and gone into her room she had shut the door sharply, crush-

ing at the same time the bit of yellow paper in her hand, and struggling fiercely to crowd back the wild joy that had surged over her when the message had been first understood.

She was ashamed of herself, horribly ashamed, and yet for a moment she could not kill the thought of what it would mean. It would wipe out all difficulties, overcome all barriers, and Livingston would be a free man once more. She steadied herself by the bed, and in the stillness she could hear her heart beating rapidly, and then suddenly it seemed to stop and everything in the room swung round and round, and she dropped in a heap on the floor and the slip of paper in her hand fell out and fluttered under a chair near by.

Only for a moment did she lay thus, however. Very speedily consciousness came back again, and the hideousness of the joy she had felt swept over her in a wave of horror at the apparent wickedness of her own heart.

She reached out and picked up the telegram and began to read it over and over again. "Come to me at once. I am dying." She repeated the words out loud—"dying"! Then she buried her head in her arms and shuddered at the awfulness of the thought. This woman dying? This splendid piece of flesh and blood? This beautiful thing who lived only for pleasure? Dying? Impossible! Death was not meant for her. She would not die. She would defy death and live, and this telegram was meant in some way to entrap her.

Should she go to her? She shrank from the thought with a great loathing. She could not go to her even if she were really ill. She might not die, and she would make this visit a matter of jest among her friends when once she was herself again. This was probably one of her heart attacks which was more serious than usual. Generally they were of short duration, Charlotte said, and she quickly recovered from them. Should she go?

She looked around the room appealingly, then got up slowly and rang for Charlotte. For some little while they talked it over between them, and Charlotte's dismay at the news the telegram brought quieted Virginia quickly.

"I must go to her myself, Miss Virginia," the girl said finally, "for if she is as ill as the doctor thinks, even though she ain't exactly dying, she will need me badly. She is the loneliest woman on earth for women friends, and she don't hesitate to say she's got no use for them. I don't love her. I've got no cause to love her, but I've lived with her for almost ten years, and if she is dying it wouldn't be human not to go to her."

She said the words with no thought of meaning as applied to Virginia, but they aroused the latter to a sense of cowardice and she began to get ready to go at once.

The telegram was shown Portia and Elizabeth immediately, and from the latter there was a sharp, decided protest.

"I don't approve of your going at all," she said bluntly. "I wouldn't trust Mrs. Grey behind a rosebush, and she's up to some devilment, you may be sure."

Portia looked suddenly drawn and old.

"I hardly know what to say, Virginia. If the woman is dying one can hardly refuse her request. If you go, I must go with you, however."

"Charlotte is going with me," Virginia answered quietly. "She knows best what to do and how to do it. If she finds Mrs. Grey as ill as she represents and still wishes to see me, I will go to her; but until Charlotte sees her I promise you I will do nothing."

There was time to catch the 7.20 train, and with a hurried good-by Virginia and Charlotte were driven rapidly to the station by Pleasants, and not until they were safely seated in the train did Virginia entirely realize what she was doing. Two hours ago such a thing would have seemed impossible. She had left no message for Livingston, and she hoped he would not even hear of this visit until she herself could tell him of it. He would have disapproved intensely of her going, and go she must. What could Mrs. Grey want with her? A thousand times this question repeated itself, and still she could find no answer. The train stopped and she got up hurriedly and went out. The cold night air blew gratefully on her hot face, and giving the address to the driver she

almost pushed Charlotte into the nearest cab and got in quickly after her.

It was Charlotte who spoke next.

"Here we are, Miss Virginia. Must I tell the man to wait?"

"Yes," she answered, handing the man some money; "yes, he can wait until I find out how long I am needed."

It was a very handsome apartment house they entered, the handsomest Virginia had ever seen; but when they found themselves on the floor occupied by Mrs. Grey a stifling sensation came over her and for a moment she felt sick. Only for a moment, however, for when the bell was answered by an ill-mannered maid, she was herself again and spoke quietly:

"This is Mrs. Grey's apartment?" she asked.

"Yes," answered the maid sourly. "But you can't see her. She is sick."

"I think I can," and Virginia pushed Charlotte through the half-opened doorway. "I have been sent for, but this friend of hers will see her first. Will you take her to Mrs. Grey or shall she go alone?"

The maid stood back angrily.

"I won't do neither," she answered. "My orders are to let no one in."

"Then your orders are wrong. Go on, Charlotte, and let Mrs. Grey know I am here."

Charlotte stepped by the girl, stupidly glaring at them, and disappeared, and Virginia, walking over to the table, put her muff on it.

After a moment she sat down and glanced slowly around the room. It was dazzlingly furnished. Mirrors and gilt, and satin and lace were in rich profusion, and the sensuous luxuriousness of the place was felt as well as seen. Here and there were vases and bowls of faded flowers, which in spite of the gorgeousness of the room gave a drearily neglected air to it that was depressing, and Virginia had a strong impulse to raise one of the windows that she might overcome the stale perfume of the dead roses and withered violets and breathe something fresh again. But before she could do so, Charlotte was back and beckoning to her, and getting up she followed her into the room where Mrs. Grey lay.

The latter's eyes were wide open, and there was something in them that put Virginia on her guard. She was breathing badly, but with a movement of the hand she motioned the nurse and Charlotte to leave the room. When they had gone she turned to Virginia—

“And so you have come,” she said gaspingly.

“Yes, I have come.”

The left hand of the sick woman fingered the counterpane nervously, the right one being hidden under it. They faced each other for a moment, then Mrs. Grey motioned Virginia to sit down.

The latter rested her arms against the foot of the bed and shook her head slowly.

"You have something to say to me? It is not necessary to sit down. I have only a few moments to stay."

The woman on the bed smiled scornfully.

"And so you believed it, believed the lie I wrote. They say I am going to die this time, but I tell you it is a lie—it is a lie!"

Her voice rose high and shrill and she half raised herself in bed, and Virginia saw at once that she was in a dangerous state of excitement.

"Perhaps they are mistaken," she said quietly, though her heart was beating rapidly. "Is there anything I can do for you, or is there anything you wish to say to me?"

Mrs. Grey lay back pantingly. She tried to reach for a glass on the table near her, but her hand fell limply to her side. Virginia seeing what she wanted, held it up to her.

"Is this it?"

She nodded, and as Virginia held it to her lips she drained its contents eagerly, and after a moment opened her eyes again.

"It is a lie," she whispered; "I am not dying. I will not die. I tell you I will not die!"

Virginia stooped over and took the trembling fingers in her hands and held them firmly.

"Yes," she said soothingly, "I think it is a mistake. You are not going to die."

The woman turned to her with a passionate light in her eyes that was almost blinding.

"Do you really mean it," she cried hysterically; "do you mean it? They said I had to die, and I'm afraid. I'm afraid!"

“And is that why you sent for me?”

Virginia's voice was low and gentle now. The woman beside her was face to face with that dread mystery before which all else in life, save right and righteousness, shrivels into nothingness, and her heart went out in a great pity toward her.

“Is that why you sent for me?”

“I sent for you”—her voice was full of the old recklessness—“because I had sworn that if I had to die—you should not live—to be his wife!”

The hand under the bed clothes shook strangely, and with a quick movement Virginia threw them back and saw it clutched a tiny pistol. With another movement equally as unexpected she snatched it from the feeble fingers which grasped it, and walking over to the mantel put it down. She was quivering all over, but clenching her teeth that they might not chatter, she came back and drew the covering over the shivering body again.

The woman glared at her with wild, angry eyes, then broke into hysterical cries:

“I am going mad!” she cried, burying her head in her arms. “Great God, I am going mad! I wanted to kill you and I have no strength! Give it back to me—I swear you shall not live—you shall not—marry him! Give it to me! Give—it—to—me!”

Suddenly she relaxed and lay back as one dead, white and still; and Virginia, seeing some

brandy on the table, poured a little of it between her teeth and rubbed the beautiful white hands and arms vigorously. After a few minutes the eyelids fluttered painfully and then opened, the lips moved, but no words were spoken. The clock on the mantel struck the half hour and Mrs. Grey stirred restlessly.

"I was going to kill you," she said gaspingly, breaking the awful silence at last. "I intended to kill you if you came."

"But you have changed your mind," and Virginia almost smiled. "You do not wish to kill me now?"

The splendid, wicked eyes looked up passionately at the girl by the bed.

"Not if you will promise me you will not marry him," she panted. "Will you promise me?"

Virginia dropped the hand she had been rubbing and got up quickly.

"I will make you no promise of any kind, and now if there is nothing else you wish to say to me I must tell you good-night."

A spasm of nervous terror flashed across the face on the pillow, and with a trembling hand she tried to clutch at Virginia's dress.

"For God's sake, don't leave me—don't leave me!" she cried. "Wait until the doctor comes—I tell you I am afraid. I am afraid!" She looked at Virginia wildly, then her voice changed again under the strain of excitement, and defiance took the place of terror. "But I

will not die—I will not die!” she continued. “I will not be put in a dirty old grave and be covered up and forgotten. Great God—I cannot die! I cannot die!”

She broke into gasping sobs, which shook her body convulsively, and Virginia, going to the door, called for the nurse. After a few moments the opiate given quieted her slightly, but Virginia dared not leave those terrified eyes following her every motion and gazing at her with a strange appeal, and yet she longed to get away.

The nurse stepped out of the room to get something, and Mrs. Grey beckoned Virginia to come nearer.

“Do not let me die,” she whispered—“I am not fit to die. Do you believe that when we die we shall live again?”

“With all my heart I believe it,” answered Virginia.

Mrs. Grey shook her head scornfully.

“I don’t believe it—I believe nothing—I don’t even believe in God; but to-night I am afraid. I tell you I am afraid!”

She clutched again at Virginia’s dress and then she looked at her sharply.

“Why don’t you marry my husband?” she gasped. “They say he loves you—the Galahad loves you. Why don’t you marry him?”

“Because I do believe in something.”

The words were low but distinct, and the woman on the bed stared frowningly, then her mouth curved into a sneer.

“And what has that to do with it?”

A slight sound at Virginia's back caused her to turn, and looking up she saw the doctor standing at the door.

She bent over the bed—

“If you have said all you wish, Mrs. Grey, I will go. Is there anything else?”

“No, there is nothing else; and remember I am not going to die—I tell you I will not die!”

A gasping, mocking laugh, that was horrible in its defiance of weakness and suffering, followed Virginia to the door, where the doctor stood aside to let her pass, and as he did so she understood that Charlotte, who knew him well, had explained her presence there at this hour of the night.

Not until the next day, when safely back in her own home, after having spent the night with Joyce, did Virginia feel the reaction of the strain of her terrible interview with Mrs. Grey, or realize the full significance of the possibilities of her visit.

To no one, not even to Charlotte or Portia, did she tell the incident of the pistol—that was one of the secrets she must carry through life, and the remembrance of it weighed heavily upon her.

It was a sick woman's fancy, caused by the terror of death, perhaps, was the explanation she had given of her visit; but she knew the explanation was a weak one and that each un-

derstood there was more that might be told, but that the telling would be painful, and they had asked no questions.

The first flush of anger that had filled her heart, the first feeling of horror, had passed away, and in its place was now a queer mixture of pity and contempt, with more pity than contempt. The woman was all physical, with no spiritual leaven in her heart or soul, and the more she thought about her the greater grew her pity for the undisciplined and indulged nature that was now face to face with the supreme tragedy of life from which it shrank in terror.

The day grew into darkness, and as the twilight fell she drew up the couch in front of the blazing logs in the old-fashioned fire-place in the hall and threw herself upon it. She was singularly tired, and yet to-morrow she must go into the city, for the day had been promised to Joyce.

With something of her old domineering spirit, Brydon's mother had decided upon the form of introduction by which Joyce was to be presented to the new life, the new world which lay before her, and despite all protests the matter had been settled and the list of invitations made out before the latter's return from her wedding trip. It had pleased Mrs. Field to forget the many remarks she had formerly made concerning her new daughter-in-law, and in presenting her to society she had decided to

make a departure, and for once have the crush which an occasion of this kind necessitated. It had beguiled many weary hours, the making out of these invitation lists, and she had allowed it to go forth that this affair was to be the most brilliant and the most beautiful that her little world had known for many years. That she was practically penniless so far as income was concerned she failed to consider. Brydon could attend to details of that nature, she would take charge of all things else; and though she could not present Joyce herself, in her chair she would take her accustomed place and receive her guests, while Brydon would introduce them to his wife.

The pitifulness and comicalness of it all came over Virginia forcibly as she lay in front of the fire watching the flames dance up and down, and the puppet-part each life must play struck her with fresh realization. "After all, most of us are but creatures of our environment," she thought dreamily, "and we dance to the music with which our string is pulled. Sometimes some of us have the courage to break the string, but not often—not often."

The sound of horses' hoofs on the frozen ground outside startled her, and she jumped up nervously. It was Livingston, she knew, and something was the matter. He came in quietly enough, but his first words were for Portia.

"What is it," asked Virginia; "what is it that has happened?"

“It is a message from Brydon. He asked me to come over and tell you for him.”

He hesitated as if uncertain what next to say, and with relief saw Elizabeth and Portia coming toward him.

“It is your Aunt Agatha,” he said, shaking hands with them abstractedly. “She—” he stopped again.

“What is it—” and Virginia’s voice died away in her throat. “Is Aunt Agatha—?”

“Yes,” he said gently, “they found her dead in her chair by the table, where they had left her busy with some matters for the—” he stopped. The word seemed so trivial.

“Party,” put in Elizabeth soberly. “Death won after all. Well, there’ll be no party now. At least there’s that much to be thankful for.”

CHAPTER XXIX

Before her marriage Joyce had plead and begged and almost wept in her entreaties that when Spinstervilla was closed for the winter months, its three old maids would come to Brydon and herself and share with them their large and lonely house.

Pleadings and arguments and tears had been in vain, however, for though it hurt Portia to deny Joyce, she knew it was best that these first few months should not be spent with her, and she was honest enough to tell her why.

“Every man is entitled to the privacy of his own home when he is learning by degrees that his wife is—a woman—not an angel,” she had said half jestingly, yet meaning it very seriously. “And until you and Brydon have adjusted yourselves to your new life it is due you both that you should be alone and discover with perfect freedom each other’s weaknesses and peculiarities.”

“But we won’t be alone,” Joyce had protested. “Mrs. Field is a colony in herself, and she will be with us you know.”

“You will be with her, you mean,” Portia rejoined teasingly. “Poor Aunt Agatha! At

one time I should have dreaded your going to her, but now she will not cause trouble and you will be practically alone, and it is best that you should be so. Perhaps you don't know it, dear, but you have married a very human man and he a very human woman, and until you learn that this is the strongest point of congeniality between you, and the basis of the forbearance due each other, you are not in a normal condition, and it isn't nice to live with people who aren't normal."

She had laughed lightly, but Joyce knew further discussion was useless, and though both she and Brydon were deeply disappointed they understood that to longer insist would but be painful to Portia and in no way change her decision. Most unwillingly they had accepted it, and the next best thing had been done by Brydon's engaging for her an apartment very near them.

The sudden death of Mrs. Field, however, had brought from Joyce a final appeal, and it was in answer to this that Portia was writing her when Elizabeth came into the room and sat down in a rather dejected attitude near the window.

Portia looked up and smiled.

"Well—and why such a look, my lady?"

Elizabeth lifted her eyebrows reproachfully.

"I was just thinking how idiotic we were to leave this"—and she waved her hand around—"and go to that," and she pointed toward the

city. "Here we are so comfortable and content, and can breathe and think and grow and be ourselves, and there we will have to live in a few stuffy cells. People who live in apartments are like prisoners—each has only his allotted space and so many cubic feet of air."

"That depends upon the point of view," Portia answered, sealing her letter and leaning back idly in her chair; "or on our recognition of the law of compensation. It remains with us generally whether when we lose one thing we do not at the same time gain another, or when we gain we do not at the same time lose. Every one needs the stir and stimulus of a city for part of the year at least," she continued. "One needs the atmospheric influence of life and energy and human interests which the sight and sound and association of people gives, and if we would keep in touch with what the world is doing, we must take part in it, if possible, not merely read about it."

"But I don't like people," Elizabeth protested—"that is, many people, and if I had to lead Joyce's life I should go into melancholy or insanity. To smirk and smile and be dressed up all the time would be maddening. I would be in a constant state of internal rage, and then I would give it up—and they'd call it—heart failure."

Portia looked across at the strong, earnest face, so free from all pretense, so full of eager sympathy for certain phases of life, so intolerant of others, and smiled indulgently.

"You're a splendid fraud, Elizabeth, and you don't know it. You pretend to dislike people and you're the best friend to people I know. The one person you are not generous to"—she hesitated—"is Laurie. Are you never going to give him the answer he wishes, dear?"

Elizabeth unfolded her arms and drummed a little impatiently on the sides of her chair, but she did not look in Portia's direction.

"Don't you think, Elizabeth, that some day you can marry him?"

"Never—couldn't do it to save my life," and she stopped short. "I really have tried to see if I couldn't," she went on after a minute, "but it's impossible. I can't do it. I could love his children dearly and be very fond of his wife—but I couldn't be his wife."

She wiped her lips nervously and the color died slowly out of her face, then she began again.

"There is something I want to tell you, Portia; something I have never told any one in my life before, but I want you to know this now, for it will make us understand each other better and settle the chance of our ever separating. I don't intend to let you get rid of me. Somebody must keep up Spinstervilla. Joyce is married, and Virginia,"—she hesitated,— "some day, perhaps, Virginia will be in her own home, and you and I must stay together to keep this one for them to come back to."

She leaned forward in her chair, and resting her elbows on her knees held her chin in her

clasped hands and with unseeing eyes gazed in the fire, and the room grew very quiet.

“About a hundred years ago,” she finally continued, “I lived in Georgia, and somebody else lived there too, who to me meant Georgia—meant America, meant Europe, Asia, and Africa, and all the little islands thrown in, and I expected some day to marry him. I never did anything in moderation—I loved or hated with my whole heart, and every particle of love that was in me I gave—to him.

“Well—it isn’t a new story or an interesting one particularly. We quarreled one night, quarreled bitterly. I was hot and unreasonable, he proud and impatient, and we separated. Soon after that he went away and I learned later that he had gone to South Africa. I have never seen him, never heard from him but once from that night to this, and I never expect now to see him again, but if I married any other man it would be with his image in my heart.

“After my aunt’s death I found among her letters one from him. It was unopened, but she had kept it from me, as she did not approve of our marriage. Had I received it he would never have gone away.” Her voice was bitter, but she controlled it bravely. “I tell you this because I have no heart to give to any man, and I would not insult Laurie by compromising with friendship. And now—you understand.”

Her voice died away and the stillness was broken only by the sputtering of the logs upon

the hearth, and for a while Portia dared not speak. She tried to, but words would not come, and her hands were held tightly together to hide their trembling, and Elizabeth saw that she was quivering as from the opening of an old, old wound.

"Perhaps I should not have told you," and her voice shook badly; "but I wanted you to know, and it is all right now. You see I can talk about it, and perhaps it is better as it is, after all."

Portia turned to her and held her hands out yearningly.

"But I have been so selfish," she said brokenly—"so selfish! I have thought that I alone had to live on the memory of other days, and you have been so bright and brave, and with this burden in your heart! Oh, Elizabeth, I did not know—I did not know!"

Her voice broke entirely, and Elizabeth stooping over kissed her quietly.

"You see, dear," and she laughed unsteadily—"you see that spinsterhood has been thrust upon us, and you see also how important it is that we make our calling and election sure."

She hesitated and her next words were almost a sob—

"You will not speak to me again of marrying, Portia?—you understand now?"

Portia's lips were trembling.

"Yes, I understand," she answered; "with all my heart I understand."

CHAPTER XXX

New Year's Eve had come, and all the world seemed waiting for the breathing out of the old year and the breathing in of the new. So subtle was the process by which the birth of the one followed the death of the other that only the human heart understood the greeting and farewell of each; but nevertheless all nature was solemnly still, as if the weight of remembrance was as yet stronger than the joy of anticipation.

The moon rose clear and bright over the hills and threw its brilliant light on the glistening, snow-covered earth; and the trees, all crusted with crystals, swung and shook under the north wind's breath—and all the world seemed waiting, waiting.

Inside, by the library fire, Livingston and Virginia sat in silence. For a long time they had been talking, and though with fine control, each felt that the strain was becoming intolerable and each glanced occasionally at the clock as if they would hasten the death of the old year and hurry the birth of the new.

Virginia had told Livingston of her visit to his former wife, and he in turn had told her

that from Charlotte he had learned that day that Mrs. Grey would shortly leave for the South.

"She is really ill," Charlotte had said to him; "and so unreasonable and irritable that no one will stay with her, and somehow I can't desert her now. She has lost most of her money—gambled it away or invested it badly, and is terribly in debt, and what the end of it all will be, God in heaven only knows."

All this Livingston had spoken of quietly to Virginia, but what he did not tell her was that, having bound Charlotte to secrecy, he had deposited to her credit a sum sufficient to cover Mrs. Grey's indebtedness and to supply the latter with all needed comforts and necessary luxuries.

It was a piece of wrecked womanhood whose life was slowly flickering out, and, like Virginia, a strange pity for the wasted life possessed him, and he was willing to do anything that could lessen the relentlessness of its ending—except to see her. That he would not do.

The fire burned low and the clock on the mantel struck the half-hour. In a few more minutes the year which had given so much, denied so much, would soon be past, and what the new year would bring they could not even guess.

Virginia glanced across at Livingston and saw that he was lost in some far-away thought. Was it of the future which was

stretching out so indefinitely? or was it of the past which made the future so uncertain?

He felt her eyes upon him, and with a start rose to his feet.

“Come,” he said quietly, “come out and listen to the bells.”

He took the long, white cloak from the chair nearest him and put it around her, and as its soft, warm folds fell to her feet he drew in his breath sharply. She was so beautiful—so beautiful! and in the sight of God she was his, and yet for the sake of the love he bore her he would not so much as kiss the hem of her garment.

They went out on the veranda and stood for a while under the spell of the scene that stretched before them, and presently Livingston turned toward her.

“It has brought you sorrow,” he said; “it has brought you suffering and sorrow, and yet if you could would you blot out the remembrance of the year that is almost dead, Virginia?”

“Not for anything life gives,” she answered quickly. Her face flamed richly and she held her hands out to him with the old winsome frankness of their first days. “I shall always thank God for this year, no matter what the coming years hold for me,” she said unsteadily, “for it has shown me the richness of life, as well as the meaning of its pain and privation.”

He lifted the hands he held in his to his lips, but said nothing, and in the distance they heard

the soft sobbing of the bells in the village below.

"Sometimes I am afraid of myself—Jonathan."

Her voice was very low, but as he heard his name for the first time from her lips he quivered at the sound and kept his eyes turned from her lest she should see their light.

"Sometimes I am afraid, for I know the old questions will come back and mock me with doubt and distrust. And as I have often asked myself before, I shall often ask myself again, perhaps—is it worth while? Is anything worth while save to live and love? Why should I, when life is so short, deny myself—deny you—the happiness, the comradeship we both so crave? But it is because life is so short that I dare not trifle with its realities—or its ideals."

She looked at him almost appealingly, but as he leaned against the railing his eyes were still turned from her. He honored her for her point of view; he accepted it; but he did not agree with it, and yet by no word or act would he now attempt to alter it, for its sincerity and purity were the deepest convictions of his heart.

"And still," she went on presently, "when I have been most tempted not to believe in myself, I have been tormented by that other thought. Suppose I do yield? Would I gain happiness at the price I would have to pay for it?"

The bells in the village ceased, and all nature waited in reverent hush for the old year's dying

breath, and only Virginia's words broke the solemn stillness.

"I do not believe it, Jonathan," and her voice was clear and full again, "for happiness is too tender a thing to live unworthily. My courage is not always strong nor my endurance great, but I know to-night, and I pray God I may always remember, that it is worth while to reach out after those things which make for better, sweeter, purer living. Perhaps," and now her voice was full of a great wistfulness that well nigh unnerved him—"perhaps I have dreamed dreams in an age too self-indulgent to let them ever come true, but I have no right to even hope that life will be more and more beautiful unless I am willing to do my part in trying to make it so. And if I, and others like me, treat these things lightly, how will the careless, thoughtless, idle world look at them after a while? If it were only you and I, it would not matter so much, perhaps; but we are telling all the world to do likewise if they so desire—and I dare not—I dare not send such a message to the world!"

Livingston's head bent lower, but still he said nothing. For a moment longer there was stillness, and then the bells rang joyously—and they knew the year was dead.

Livingston moved from the railing against which he had been leaning, and took Virginia's hands in his.

“The message you send to the world is the message God meant all women to send, Virginia,” he said a little unsteadily. “It is a message for men to be better men, and I would to God I were more ready to receive it. Some day, perhaps, I may see this as you do, but as yet I am in darkness—I do not see it yet. You have taught me, however,” and the gentleness of his voice caressed her richly, “that if love be love it will stand all strain, endure all tests—if love be love. And ours, Virginia—our love—?”

There was no faltering in the face she raised to his.

“Is love,” she said bravely. “Our love—is love.”

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